
Renaissance and Reformation
Renaissance et Réforme



Conti, Brooke. Confessions of Faith in Early Modern England

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Volume 38, Number 3, Summer 2015

URI: <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1087409ar>

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.33137/rr.v38i3.26156>

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Publisher(s)

Iter Press

ISSN

0034-429X (print)

2293-7374 (digital)

[Explore this journal](#)

Cite this review

Swavely, M. (2015). Review of [Conti, Brooke. Confessions of Faith in Early Modern England]. *Renaissance and Reformation / Renaissance et Réforme*, 38(3), 197–199. <https://doi.org/10.33137/rr.v38i3.26156>

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Book Reviews / Comptes Rendus

Conti, Brooke.

Confessions of Faith in Early Modern England.

Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2014. Pp. 225. ISBN 978-0-8122-4575-2 (hardcover) \$55.

The narratives Brooke Conti identifies as “confessions of faith” are products of the particular religious and political climate of seventeenth-century England. In this “age of oaths of allegiance and civil and religious warfare,” statements of personal faith were rarely straightforward (4). Rather, as religious identities and public roles were intertwined, autobiographical accounts of belief were necessarily pressured by external factors such as one’s relationship to the state church, familial associations, and political agendas. The texts explored in *Confessions of Faith in Early Modern England* demonstrate that this tension complicates a writer’s ability to express religious identity with any clarity; efforts to explain or reveal personal beliefs often serve to further obscure them.

Conti distinguishes the confession of faith as a specific type of autobiographical text: it is a “polemically inspired”—but often fragmentary or unsatisfactory—expression of personal belief that emerges within a work of religious controversy (2). Within this context of seventeenth-century polemic, writers struggled to negotiate identities when idiosyncratic experience did not quite fit within the sharp (imagined) boundaries of religious parties or factions. Within the public realm, Conti’s study suggests, religious identity was expected to be distinct and absolute; privately, individual belief was much more fluid and complex. This conflict between private experience and public identity is what produced confessions of faith: writers felt the need to establish their religious identities but were limited by what they could say publicly.

The book studies six authors and is divided into three sections. Each section pairs two authors whose confessions of faith reflect similar representational challenges. The first part, “Oaths of Allegiance,” considers works by James I and John Donne. In their public prose, both James and Donne are invested in projects of performing allegiance to the state church, despite personal backgrounds and shifts in identity that might be seen to challenge that allegiance. James faced the seemingly impossible task of presenting himself as Protestant enough

to succeed Elizabeth I as head of the English nation and church while simultaneously appearing loyal to his Catholic family. Examining autobiographical passages in *Basilikon Doron* (1599), the second edition of *An Apologie for the Oath of Allegiance* (1609), and several letters and speeches, Conti suggests that James faced “an extraordinary double bind”: he must reconcile the contradictory claims on his religious identity while avoiding charges of hypocrisy and maintaining political authority (23). Donne, like James, was a Protestant convert from a Catholic family and thus also found it necessary to publicly perform his allegiance to the state church. In *Pseudo-Martyr* (1610) and *Devotions Upon Emergent Occasions* (1624), however, Donne highlights the general facts of his conversion and loyalty to the English church while avoiding specific, personal articulations of belief.

In the book’s second part, “Personal Credos,” Conti examines the more individualistic autobiographical expressions of John Milton and Thomas Browne. While both of these authors “insist on the primacy of reason and personal choice” in matters of religious identity, Conti demonstrates that the autobiographical passages of Milton’s mid-century polemical prose and Browne’s *Religio Medici* (1643) are marked by representational anxiety (14). Milton’s confessions of faith, Conti argues, reveal the author’s uncertainty about his vocation; his self-presentation is ostensibly confident, but the length and force of his assertions of literary and spiritual election signal the author’s effort to convince not only his readers but also himself of his calling. Like Milton, Browne crafts a public persona in *Religio Medici* that does not entirely mask a troubled sense of religious identity. While Browne’s expansive prose that delights in paradox has often been read as evidence of a spirit of toleration and flexibility, Conti is skeptical; she reads Browne’s “slippery and protean persona” as “a response to real religious uncertainty” (112). Conti supports this reading through careful study of an earlier manuscript version of the *Religio* (dated 1635). While the authorized 1643 publication of the text seems generally content to submit to the authority of the state church, the earlier manuscript features less orthodox passages that were either edited or removed entirely, suggesting a struggle to reconcile Browne’s own singularity with his allegiance to the church of England.

With the book’s final section, “Loyal Dissents?,” Conti moves into the latter part of the seventeenth century by considering the writings of John Bunyan and James II. Compared with the confessions of faith of James I, Donne, Milton,

and Browne, Bunyan's *Grace Abounding to the Chief of Sinners* (1666) and James II's speeches show little interest in aligning the author with the institutional church: after the Restoration, the Church of England had "a less complete imaginative hold over English Christians" (164). But *Grace Abounding* also seems unconcerned with asserting Bunyan's religious identity in opposition to the established church. The political goal of his autobiographical text is rather to assert Bunyan as truly saved, despite his imprisonment for nonconformist preaching. James II's speeches represent the end of what Conti considers the confession of faith. In arguing that a Catholic monarch could effectively rule a Protestant nation, James II suggests a separation of religious identity and public role that was not possible during earlier years of enforced allegiance to the state church or mid-century civil war.

While Conti's work is valuable for her fresh perspective on the specific texts she examines, the book's most important strengths lie in its broader contributions to studies of early modern autobiography and nonfictional prose. In showing that the writers of confessions of faith use autobiography as a "forensic device," Conti demonstrates that autobiography in the early modern period was less a formally structured genre than a flexible tool that was used for a variety of purposes (4). In developing careful close readings of autobiographical passages within polemical texts, Conti's study calls for further attention to the "literary complexity" of early modern prose, which, as Conti notes, is often ignored (16). Finally, the book is an insightful reminder of the external pressures that influence any autobiographical endeavour, especially those written within the contexts of social, religious, and political controversy.

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