Religion and Gender, vol. 2, no. 2 (2012), pp.
379-381
www.religionandgender.org
URN:NBN:NL:UI:10-1-101615
ISSN: 1878-5417
Publisher: Igitur Publishing (Utrecht)
Copyright: this work is licensed under a Creative
Commons Attribution License (3.0)

Review of Björn Krondorfer, *Male Confessions: Intimate Revelations and the Religious Imagination*, Stanford: Stanford University Press 2010, xi + 298 pages, ISBN 978-0-8047-6900-6 (pb).

BY ADRIAAN VAN KLINKEN, SOAS – UNIVERSITY OF LONDON

The words *Male Confessions* may evoke various associations in the reader who comes across this title. As the author notices himself, it might be the title of statements of faith but also of a gay porn movie. So what kind of book do we have under review here? The subtitle gives an indication: it is a book about intimate revelations and religious imagination, not in a general sense but the revelations and imagination *of men*. 'It is about men opening their intimate lives and thoughts to be public through the form of confessional writing,' the author explains (p 2). To be clear, 'men' is not an unproblematized category or, even worse, a synonym for human beings. Krondorfer is one of the pioneers of the field of critical men's studies in religion. In this emerging field men are studied as gendered beings in relation to religion. With this book Krondorfer makes an innovative contribution to the field, and more broadly to the fields of masculinity studies, religious studies and literary studies, by providing a detailed critical gendered reading of men's confessional writing.

Since the *Confessiones* of Augustine, confessional texts and practices are popular in religious discourse, particularly in Christianity, and have gained an important place in Western culture. Krondorfer focuses on

texts. He conceptualizes confessional writing as a quality rather than as a genre. This quality is the sincere attempt of the author 'to investigate himself in an introspective and retrospective mode, often triggered by some rupture in life and followed by a transformative experience' (p 10). Krondorfer also makes clear that confessional writing is a gendered activity as the act of writing for a long time was a male privilege and self-disclosure in written texts is a relatively controlled form of risk-taking. Through a gender reading of such texts he wants to critically reveal both the vulnerability exposed in male self-disclosure and the religious and gendered rhetoric in which this vulnerability is concealed.

The selected confessiographies (a neologism coined by the author) that are subjected to a close reading are very diverse and vary in their historical context, religious tradition and cultural setting. Of course Augustine's *Confessions* is a key text, as well as some more recent (and less well-known) texts: the deathbed confession of a Jewish ghetto policeman who perished during the Holocaust (Calel Perechodnik), the confessional document of a high-ranking Nazi perpetrator who after the war reconverted to Christianity (Oswald Pohl) and the writings of contemporary American gay theologians (in particular Scott Haldeman and Donald Boisvert). While reading these key texts, other confessional fragments and documents from Christian, Jewish and (post)modern secularized authors are brought in. Obviously, the selection of these texts is somewhat arbitrary and does reflect the personal and scholarly interests of the author, such as in Holocaust studies and in the sociopolitical context of post-war Germany. Acknowledging the many differences in the body of materials, Krondorfer also points to a commonality: all texts 'tell us how our lives, men's lives, are filled with contradictions, vagaries, indecisions, limitations, blind spots, turmoil, and unresolved business; and how male confessiographies, in their partial and partisan ways, bear witness to a boisterous, tarnished and fragmented vitality' (p 11).

Between the introduction and the concluding 'Outlook', the book presents six main chapters that are alternated with three interludes (*On Mirrors*, *On Testimony*, and *On Tears*). In the main chapters, the focus does not only shift between various texts and authors but also between various themes, such as men's bodies, sexuality, kinship and intimate relationships (especially between mother and son), moral agency, guilt and culpability etcetera. Exploring these themes, the author opens up new perspectives on the complexity of masculinities in the sphere of religion and the ambiguities of men's lives. He also develops concepts that can be useful in the broader study of men, masculinities and religion, such as the notion of

the non-absent male body. This concept refers to the male body that is portrayed in various ways in the text, but is not subjected to critical inquiry; it is not explicitly present in the text but rather assumed as the normative body. The concept critically reveals how the non-absence of male bodies renders invisible issues of moral responsibility. Krondorfer's objective in this book is not so much to make a specific argument or to prove a particular point but to probe different layers of meaning that can be discovered when lending men's confessional writings an attentive ear. In my view, this has resulted in a book that indeed is very meaningful. Truly, reading it is an enriching and inspirational experience, not only intellectually but also personally. As the author notices, reading confessional writings – which are themselves products of an introspective gaze – leads one into introspection. The same applies to reading his interpretation of these writings.

In response to other men's attempts at revealing themselves intimately, Krondorfer himself had inserted an autobiographical voice into his critical reading. Occasionally the scholarly prose is interrupted with his personal confessions (put in *italics*) disclosing his own gendered practices and experiences. So the reader learns about intimate parts of the author's life, varying from his first zit to the bodily signs of aging, his growing up in post-war Germany, the relationship with his mother, the love for and worries about his daughters, a crisis in his marriage, his dealing with sexual attraction and his watching of Mel Gibson's *The Passion of Christ*. As the author acknowledges himself, to insert an autobiographical voice not only enriches but also complicates the book, as it comes with a number of difficulties and potential traps. I am not going to discuss here whether some of the intimate revelations may not be too private, or in some cases too trivial, to be made public. After all, the significance of some confessions that at first sight are too private or trivial may become apparent only when reading from particular perspectives or with specific questions. Therefore I would like to thank the author for having the courage to be vulnerable, demonstrating that it is feasible for male scholars to disclose a little bit more about themselves.

To conclude, *Male Confessions* is not just one academic monograph among many others. It is a stylistically well-written and highly original book that offers meaningful readings of men's confessional writings and makes a sophisticated contribution to our understanding of the complicated moral and religious dimensions of men's lives.