The major development in the history of penitential thought during the years between 1100 and 1500 is not the dismissing of rigid penitential tariffs, nor is it “the discovery of the individual” or the “re-birth of conscience.”¹ The most important development, it can be argued, was the creation throughout Europe of schools and universities where students were introduced to a common tradition through a common curriculum of study and where they developed common methods of thinking about and of teaching about penance. It is in this context, aptly evoked by the title of Richard Southern’s book: *Scholastic Humanism and the Unification of Europe,*² that students and masters became for the first time an intellectual force to be reckoned with. During these centuries the large and diverse community of thought represented by students of law and of theology came to play for the first time an important role in the history of penance.

It would be a mistake, however, to think of these scholastic jurists and theologians as being primarily concerned with settling arguments about dogma or with determining fine points of doctrine. They were, first and foremost, teachers, and their task was to introduce each year a new crop of students to the entire tradition of law or theology that they represented. If one of their favourite teaching techniques was to present that tradition in terms of seemingly contrary or contradictory doctrines or practices, this should not lead us to believe that they wished to resolve these disputes, or to remove once and for all the tension between competing historical formulations. Rather, we should imagine them as collecting and cultivating as many of these points of conflict in the tradition as possible and then exploring their various

---


implications as a fruitful technique for the education of the young jurist and theologian.³

Older histories of penance have, instead, generally chosen to present their subject as a series of battles over doctrine.⁴ It is often supposed, for example, that one school of thought in the 12th century argued for the primacy of interior contrition of the heart in penance, while another championed a view that privileged external confession to a priest. The various authors are then lined up on one side or the other of this “debate,” and a narrative of their supposed conflict is constructed. A more adequate account of this history might propose that both positions were important in the tradition, and that the teacher’s job was to put authoritative formulations of both into conversation with each other. In this essay, I would like to follow this second course and ask what it is that theologians (and canonists) thought they were trying to do when they discussed questions of penance in the schools. The old answer was that they were trying to define doctrines, remove apparent contradictions in the received authorities, and reconcile any ambiguities. In what follows, I will imagine instead that they were not defining or establishing doctrines but, rather, were attempting to introduce a long and rich tradition to students who wanted to master it. Instead of taking sides in a dispute and proposing their own unique solutions, the masters in the schools regularly used disputes to illustrate a common, if complicated, view of penance and give students the tools they needed if they were to engage the entire tradition of which they were the inheritors. It is hoped that this small change in perspective, from adversarial to educational, may allow us to take a fresh look at the history of penance in this period.

---
