Jesuits as Counsellors in the Early Modern World: Introduction

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The fortunes of Jesuits offering political counsel and the fervent debates triggered by their activities take us into the heart of early modern European, especially Catholic political culture. Jesuits gave political advice and educated members of the Catholic elite—from secular and ecclesiastical princes to magistrates and young nobles lower down the political and social hierarchy—during a period of profound change to the outlook, organization, and exercise of government. The ways in which government was informed, organized, and communicated came increasingly under scrutiny and pressure to reform. The unravelling of Christian unity, while destabilizing the established normative framework, at the same time escalated the debate about the religious character of political, especially monarchical authority. The question as to whether the means and ends of political action could be aimed at the preservation (and expansion) of the state and yet remain anchored in Christian ethics greatly exercised princes, counsellors, and theologians. The urgency with which the issue was discussed is reflected in a vast and diverse literature on reason of state and the politics of conscience. A good part of this literature, in turn, reflects new trends in how political knowledge and information was produced, disseminated, and fed into political decisions. Over time, the authority of expertise changed and established itself more firmly as a collaborator and a source of legitimacy for political power. Expertise and experts in various

1 Still the most comprehensive general survey to date are the seven volumes in the series The Origins of the Modern State in Europe, 13th to 18th Centuries, ed. Wim Blockmans and Jean-Philippe Genet (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995–2000); also Wolfgang Reinhard, Geschichte der Staatsgewalt: Eine vergleichende Verfassungsgeschichte Europas von den Anfängen bis zur Gegenwart (Munich: Beck, 1999).

guises became integral to the administration and gradual bureaucratic transformation of early modern polities secular and ecclesiastical, and including the Society of Jesus and other religious orders.3

The political counsellor was very much at the center of these developments, with the role itself subject to ongoing debate.4 That good government required good counsel was commonly accepted. Those inhabiting the role could refer to a long tradition deeply embedded in European political discourse and practice. The relationship between counsellor, councilor, and counselee, however, was much in flux. The contributors to this special issue look at the role of the religious as political counsellor, and on the Society of Jesus as one of the laboratories of early modernity in particular. The term “political counsel,” for the purpose of this investigation, is hedged to encompass the activities of Jesuits advising on secular affairs and offering counsel to secular rather than ecclesiastical authorities, and including Jesuit instruction and preparation of lay individuals for political leadership.

The focus, then, is on the place of Jesuits in the complex process which saw medieval polities gradually mutate into early modern bureaucratic governments. Looking back, we recognize that the later sixteenth and seventeenth century saw the unfolding of an accelerating process of professionalization and relative secularization of political knowledge concomitant to a process of privatization of conscience. In this narrative of differentiation and relative ascendance of expertise in politics, the role and the fortune of the religious as

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3 The motivations and challenges of transforming the government of the Society of Jesus during this period are discussed in Markus Friedrich, Der lange Arm Roms?: Globale Verwaltung und Kommunikation im Jesuitenorden 1540–1773 (Frankfurt: Campus Verlag, 2011).

4 The interest in the history of political counsel is increasingly establishing itself as a distinct field of inquiry lapping into connected fields like the history of knowledge or the history of science. On counsellors and councils from the late medieval to the early modern period, see, for instance, the very useful introduction and essays in Cédric Michon, ed., Conseils et conseillers dans l’Europe de la Renaissance, c. 1450–1550 (Tours: Presses Universitaires François Rabelais de Tours, 2012).