

## The Dark Box by John Cornwell, A Secret History of Confession

The Dark Box, A Secret History of Confession by John Cornwell, Profile Books, London, 2014

x - Catholics today are told that confession reconciles them to God's love

COMMENT: Herbert McCabe said we confess and ask for forgiveness because we are already forgiven and not to be forgiven. The book tells us that on page 238.

On a similar note, Cornwell states that instead of people being told anymore that they will go to Hell forever at death unless they confess their grave sins they will be told that they are just fixing their relationship with God not his with them.

It must be noted that what they are told does not repudiate the everlasting punishing of Hell. It is just stating Catholic doctrine in a positive way. The implication is that if you do not confess then you are divorced from God's love. It is said God loves you anyway but you can reject that love. So if you turn away from God's love and suffer the fault is all your own. You condemn yourself.

God should be insulted by people who ask him for forgiveness as if he hasn't already done so! God does not care then about your sins if you are forgiven even without asking! That is an insult to the people you have hurt by your sins.

If God is the one rejecting the person, if the Church is what is rejecting the person, then to put all the blame on the person is terrible. It is unjust. If you are really self-condemned then those who avoid you and ignore you are only respecting that self-condemnation.

The idea of blaming the sinner entirely that the sinner punishes herself and its nothing to do with God is somehow relatively inoffensive among Christians.

I don't know why people find this approach less offensive than the suggestion that if you don't confess and get the priest to forgive you, you will suffer punishment forever from an angry God in Hell.

It is strange and hypocritical to say that the idea of God punishing you is offensive and wrong while it is okay if he makes you in such a way that you will suffer if you don't have a proper relationship with him. Imagine a husband that beats up his wife to punish her. A husband who encourages her to take a drug so that she endures horrific loneliness if she is apart from him is still punishing her but in a less direct looking way. Both men still want her to suffer. That is the problem - not how the suffering happens or whether it is self-condemnation or not.

The Bible says that if you consume bread and drink the cup in memory of Jesus without recognising the body you could become sick and die like many others who have done so. This is a clear instance where the action cannot be blamed for the bad effects. It is not like drinking too much all the time. God is sending evil on the people who commit the sin. Jesus in his parables spoke of people being cast out into the outer darkness. Clearly God does punish directly.

The notion that God does not punish directly is playing on our psychological tendency to hate people more if they attack us directly. It is us opening ourselves up to a passive aggressive God.

xi - Cornwell was sexually propositioned during confession to a priest when he was in his early teens.

COMMENT: The priest was Leslie McCallum, He gave Cornwell alcoholic drink to make him more pliable. He listened to Cornwell's sins but he didn't hear what he wanted to hear. So he asked, "Have you had problems with sexual sins?". Then he told Cornwell that such problems can show up during examination of the penis and asked Cornwell to expose his penis. Cornwell was driven out of the room by his discomfort. This was spiritual abuse. Cornwell did not report the abuse. He thought that the rule that you cannot tell what goes on in confession applied not just to him but also to the priest. The priest happily went on to become chaplain in his ideal sick playground: a boarding school for boys.

Catholics feared telling on the priest as the scandal would lead to people endangering their souls by not going near them for their pardon.

The priest-psychotherapist, Richard Sipe, stated that sexual abuse based around the confessional was murder of the victim's soul. He says it ruins the victim's spiritual integrity forever. Cornwell certainly carries the pain of the encounter to this very

day.

xvi - Church law since the early 1400's in the Memoraile Presbiterorum ordered that children near puberty must start confessing and go at least once a year.

The Church had decreed previously that those who have reached the age of discretion must confession at least once annually. The age of discretion is roughly the age of puberty.

In 1910, Pope Pius X made it law that children must now confess before puberty and first confession must start at 7. He considered it possible for a child that age to commit mortal sin so this led to children being warned about such sin and its consequences and thus innocent children were burdened with Catholic guilt. Cornwell notes that this law meant "exposure to sexual predators".

COMMENT: Cornwell errs in saying that young children were barred from confession before 1910. They didn't have to confess, they were not turned away and the rule to confess if they committed grave sin still applied.

Some say that most of the sexual abuse by priests, involved teenage boys. But a large percentage were abused before their teens and they were certainly groomed for years prior to the abuse. The Church always commanded that children in their teens have to confess at least once a year. If so, then it was exposing lots of children to the risk of abuse by its law.

A therapist for paedophile priests in the UK stated in Cornwell's book, 'In all those cases of clerical abuse I dealt with, the sacrament of confession was used by the molester to discover vulnerability and groom candidates for abuse.' It is true that confession led to many children being targeted for sexual abuse through confession.

xvii - Cornwell notes that the priest sits as judge over women and children and this is an unequal relationship. He says it is not an equal relationship where all parties voluntarily achieve reconciliation.

COMMENT: Confession is set up like erotic foreplay. A dominant male and another person are in a small place - the box. The inferior person has to share secrets with the male - even ones of a sexual nature.

The relationship created in confession governs other relationships with the child such as taking her or him on retreats or for trips etc.

The relationship between priest and penitent is dangerous for it gives the priest undue influence over the person. The priest can project his own problems with sexuality on to the penitent. The priest will feel like a freak for hating sex and will naturally want others to feel that way too in order for himself to feel more normal. The priest can and try to direct the penitent's sexuality in an unhealthy direction where they feel loathing for it and fear of it. They are told to fear God's eternal wrath for their sins. Mad stuff!

Page 71, an ex-priest called Achilli was slandered by John Henry Newman in a bid to discredit his mission to expose the evils of the Roman Catholic confessional. Achilli took legal proceedings against Newman for criminal libel. Newman was found guilty. The Church claimed that Cardinal Wiseman had the proof that Newman was innocent but it vanished.

COMMENT: How convenient!

Page 73-75, The ideal confessor in Catholic opinion was the Cure d'Ars, St John Mary Vianney. Benedict XVI made him Patron of the Year of the Priesthood in 2011. He spent 14 hours a day hearing confessions. The members of his parish confessed very often as a result of his influence over them.

COMMENT: But Vianney was seriously mentally disturbed as he had his orchard razed as children would steal apples from it and commit sin. He went to great lengths to prevent others sinning. Vianney was made Patron of the Year of Priesthood in 2011 by Pope Benedict XVI. Should a religion that has saints like that be allowed access to a child's inner feelings and mind?

xx - Father Thomas Beales who would not leave the sinking Titanic for some people wanted confession and absolution and other priest who risked their lives to give the sacrament are applauded for their compassion.

COMMENT: Obviously these priests thought that dying in grave sin unless it is forgiven by confession means eternal loss in Hell. A religious faith that leads to people risking and losing their lives over a fictitious Hell is cruel and cannot be seen as compassionate or good. If the priests were compassionate, this compassion was misguided. And why not see them not just as being compassionate but as possibly fanatical? The confession system praises and endorses and enables fanaticism and is to be condemned for the sake of the principle. That is why we can safely ignore any alleged good the confessional

does.

Page 29 - Fra Alonso de Valdelomar, a priest in fifteenth century Spain, would not hear confessions unless he was paid enough money first. In 1520, Father Pareja was known for having had no concern for the confidentiality of the confessional. He gossiped about the sins he was told.

Page 36 - the Church made it acceptable to repent sin just because it would put you in Hell. This is really fearing the punishment not the sin and cannot be considered to be real repentance. Cornwell notes that the Church said such "repentance" was a gift from God and a preparation for the soul to approach God with better motives.

COMMENT: The teaching that fearing the punishment not the sin is sufficient for forgiveness is blasphemous. God is in effect rewarding such selfishness. It could be a preparation for approaching God but that does not make it enough. And it might not be a preparation either. How could it be if it is enough?

Page 48-49 - friars moved around from convent to convent to hear the confessions of nuns. Nuns had to confess month and the convents were austere and puritanical and beautiful things were banned. In 1644, Alonso de Andrade in Spain remarked how nuns could get totally obsessed with their confessors. The system made them vulnerable to predatory friars.

Page 50 - 41% of cases of solicitation were facilitated by the confessional box in Spain in the seventeenth and eighteenth century.

Page 98 - under the fundamentalism and opposition to anything that contradicted Church doctrine or Pope Pius X, Catholicism went into double-think mode. This was part of the reason why priests were able to abuse children one day and then say Mass the next.

COMMENT: Yes - Catholicism is so irrational that devoted Catholics must suffer from cognitive dissonance or be mistaking the feeling that the faith is true for belief in it being true.

Page 105 - Pope Pius X lied and contradicted history when he said the Church recognised the need for children of 7 to go to confession for they were in danger of committing grave sin. Henry Charles Lea was one person who argued that confession at such a vulnerable age was dangerous for it was trying to inflict fear of an angry God on an innocent child.

COMMENT: Some Catholics say that God's anger is a metaphor. If you are not in a relationship with God, you cannot enter his presence and so you will suffer. They comparing it to needing water and refusing to take it. They say God does not punish but if you do evil you will bring evil consequences on yourself. Thus in that way you punish yourself. But that is not punishment. Punishment is doing evil to a person for doing evil. The reason for punishment is that if a prohibition does not lay down penalties for doing certain things, then it is not really a prohibition at all and the good and the bad end up being treated equally.

A God who does not punish then is an immoral and evil God.

If God does not punish, then if able, he should make the evil person as well off as the good person. If he cannot, then when you do evil and suffer afterwards, it does not follow that the evil is the result of the evil you have done. The evil is the consequence of God not being able to stop it coming upon you, and it is not the consequence of your actions.

If you punish the sinner out of spite, that is actually safer than punishing the sinner and telling yourself that it is the sin you are getting at and not them. You are seeing yourself as dealing with a thing not a person. Love the sinner and hate the sin is pure religious manipulation. Religion cannot dare to condone hatred for sinners openly for it will get an even worse evaluation from society than it does already.

Page 110 - the Catechism talks about sin and warns about what a grave evil it is and how it is the worst evil of all. Catholicism teaches that harming the soul is worse than harming the body. Cornwell infers that the Church teaches that harming another person bodily is not as bad as harming their soul.

Page 196 says that the priests who abused got a mindset where the body was of less value than the soul.

COMMENT: Good point! Also, if somebody is sexually abused by a priest and their soul is destroyed, the priest will reason that their soul is their responsibility. He will argue that his intention was to harm the body not the soul as the body is not worthy of the same concern as the soul is.

Page 141, "Immodest acts, however slight they may be, that are done from the motive of exciting lust, even though it do not ensue, are grievous sins - H Davis SJ, Moral and Pastoral Theology" (Also - xxi - mentions the Catholic doctrine that

all sins to do with sexual desire and sex are considered mortal or deserving of Hell)

COMMENT: Such doctrines are spiritual abuse.

Page 162 - We are told that "research conducted by Professor Gerry Kearns at the National University of Ireland, Maynooth, reveals spikes in sexual abuse rising to 10 per cent of priests in certain dioceses, more than three times the calculated average percentage of paedophiles in Western countries".

COMMENT: While this does not prove that all dioceses were as bad, it makes it possible that they were.

Page 170 - "Sexual abuse of children linked to the confessional has not only been widespread, but is known to be especially destructive to the children involved. A priest in England, ordained thirty years ago, and for twenty years a psychotherapist treating clerical sex offenders within his diocese, wrote to me that 'in all those cases [of clerical abuse of minors], the sacrament of confession was used [by the molester] to discover vulnerability and groom candidates for abuse'."

Page 171, in March 2010, 8,500+ people responded when the German Catholic Church asked for people to report clerical abuse in parishes and schools. Andreas Zimmermann analysed the results and told KNA - a news agency - that the abusing clergy were able to exploit "their moral authority and psychological effect of rites like confession to gain power over children."

Page 182, the Cloyne Report shows that some priests who learned of allegations of sex abuse against priests would not tell even their bishop. They pretended that what they were told was under the seal of confession though it was not.

COMMENT: If a priest has no problem keeping the abuse he has learned about in the confessional to himself, it is surprising that they would keep such abuse secret if they learned about it outside of confession?

Page 184 "Cardinal Sean Brady ... admitted that he was the notary in 1975 when two teenage boys testified against Smyth in a canon law tribunal. The boys had taken an oath under threat of excommunication never to speak of their allegations again. Their submissions had been endowed, by the ecclesiastical authorities, with the secrecy of the seal of sacramental confession."

COMMENT: Sick - it is a disgrace that Brady is still in office.

Page 190, Doctor Marie Keenan of University College Dublin found from interviewing priests who engaged in sexual abuse of children that they are able to appear and act so holy to their congregations because "they had routinely confessed their sins to a fellow priest, confident that their crimes would be protected by the seal of the confessional". The priest "will begin to feel good about himself again".

Page 192, abusing priests interviewed by Keenan "avoided confessors who might ask uncomfortable questions, or responded harshly to what they had heard".

COMMENT: The confession is famous for churning out people who commit the same sins over and over again for it makes them feel washed and clean and forgiven.

FINALLY Confession to a priest is an intrusion into a child's mental life which is so private and it amounts to mild abuse at best. Confession has smoothed things for paedophile priests. Its the dark sacrament never mind the dark box.