
BOOK REVIEW

Confession and Bookkeeping: The Religious, Moral, and Rhetorical Roots of Modern Accounting

James A. Aho

State University of New York Press, 2006, 131 pages

Reviewed by Charles Hartman, Cedarville University

James Aho's book, *Confession and Bookkeeping*, presents the idea that double-entry bookkeeping arose from the desire in Renaissance Italy for all actions to be brought into conformity with God's requirements, more specifically, with the dictates of the Roman Catholic Church. While the book does not address many modern accounting issues, it does present an interesting examination of the way in which social and cultural forces can shape business practice.

Dr. Aho, Professor of Sociology at Idaho State University, begins his book by stating the "problem" with Max Weber's argument that "has become virtually a dogmatic injunction in sociology, namely, that Catholicism has been (and remains) a poor host to the forces of economic change" (p. 1). In examining Weber's

argument, Aho begins by describing the origins of Roman Catholic penance. He then develops the concept of "scrupulosity," or compulsive concern over one's own possible wrongdoing, as it played out first in every day medieval life, then in business practices of the era.

Chapters 6 and 7 describe the development of double-entry bookkeeping itself as an outgrowth of the work of the notary bookkeeper, guardian of proper form in business transactions. Luca Pacioli's *Particularis de Computis et Scripturis*, sometimes considered to be the first bookkeeping text, is shown to be a logical outgrowth of medieval rhetorical technique, one well suited to recording all details of a business transaction to show that the merchant was above reproach in the conduct of his business.

The final chapter contends that double-entry bookkeeping “legitimized capitalist accumulation in [several] . . . ways,” by demonstrating that God and the Church could have an appropriate interest in business, if conducted justly and recorded in an honest manner (p. 86). The chapter also states that the “unintended consequence” of Calvinism is that “the pursuit of worldly things—honor, power, and money—was liberated from spiritual control” (p. 91). By contrast, medieval Catholic merchants are portrayed as “steward[s] of a benefice that is not finally their own, but is only temporarily given them to manage and answer for” (p. 94).

Aho does not write from any particular religious perspective. He generally adopts a detached tone in describing religious values and practices. The reader would benefit from a prior understanding of major differences between the Catholic and Protestant perspectives on salvation, although some information on this topic is provided in the book. Protestant readers may be particularly interested in the Appendix, which describes

Martin Luther’s rejection of the Catholic system of confession.

The book does an excellent job in immersing the reader into the mindset of the 15th century Italian merchant. We come to understand the tensions between running a successful business and satisfying the demands of conscience, church, and Creator. We also meet several interesting characters, including the remarkable Francesco di Marco Datini, whose desire for complete records caused him to preserve “150,000 pieces of correspondence, 500 account books (in double-entry), 300 deeds, and hundreds of other instruments” (p 38). Apparently Signor Datini would not have been a good client for Arthur Andersen’s Houston office.

It is clear the author has done extensive research. The references section is 14 pages long, with well over 150 sources noted. The reference list is eclectic, incorporating works from around the world in fields ranging from history, theology, and sociology to accounting, economics, and management.

Who would benefit from reading this book? Despite the subtitle, *The Religious, Moral, and*

Rhetorical Roots of Modern Accounting, it is not much concerned with contemporary accounting problems, instead focusing on the origins of double-entry bookkeeping. When I taught introductory accounting classes, I would occasionally compare the bookkeeping journal to the “Dear Diary” that might be maintained by a teenager, or to the captain’s log book employed on an ocean voyage. This book would help a reader understand the possible religious significance of fundamental accounting documents.

The book would probably be more interesting to economists than to accountants. I have a faculty colleague, an economist, who occasionally drops the name “Weber” into conversations without elaboration, the way a basketball fan might do with the name “Jordan.” This book could be helpful for professors like my colleague when they examine the assumptions alluded to in the book’s first chapter, that medieval Catholicism was not fertile ground for the development of modern commerce.

Readers, regardless of academic discipline or denomi-

national affiliation, will be struck by the piety displayed by these medieval merchants. Each page of Pacioli’s ledger was headed with the inscription translated “in the name of God” (p. 71). Although Pacioli was a monk, he was well acquainted with business practices; his notations reflected common Renaissance practice (p. 67). The modern reader would do well to apply the same level of devotion to his own business affairs as he seeks to “take captive every thought to make it obedient to Christ” (II Cor. 10:5b NIV) and do all to the glory of God (I Cor. 10:31).