

## THE LITERATURE OF CONFESSION

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“THOU HAST MADE US FOR THYSELF and our hearts our restless until they find their rest in Thee.” So exclaims St. Augustine in the most famous quotation from *The Confessions*, the greatest of all spiritual autobiographies. The topic of his spiritual autobiography is set from the beginning--finding rest in God; more acutely it is about the *God* in whom St. Augustine finds rest. His work is a self-proclaimed, extended prayer of which he writes that it

... praise[s] the righteous and good God as [it] speaks either of my evil or good, and [it is] meant to excite men’s minds and affections toward him. At least as far as I am concerned, this is what [it] did for me when [it was] being written and [it still does] this when read. What some people think of [it] is their own affair; but I do know that [it has] given pleasure to many of my brethren and still does so.<sup>1</sup>

Spiritual autobiography produces a salutary effect both in its author and in its readers. Self-reflection provides an occasion for becoming aware of God’s mysterious and provident grace in the details of one’s life; what at the time may have seemed serendipitous happenstance, in recollection through the eyes of faith is recognized as divine providence.

What then is a confession but a profession of the goodness and mercy of God? The dual meaning of *confess* includes admitting one’s moral and spiritual deficiencies as well as acknowledgement of the grace of God. The occasion of recounting one’s sins, therefore, becomes an opportunity to praise and give thanks to God for his compassion. Confession, as opposed to a boastful recounting of one’s sordid past, always involves a loathing of one’s former life and a sense of need and gratitude toward God for divine

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<sup>1</sup>The *Retractations*, II, 6 as found in *Augustine: Confessions and Enchiridion*, Albert C. Outler, ed. and trans., (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1955), p. 24.

forgiveness; it is the publican giving voice to his plaintive cry: “God be merciful to me, the sinner.” Rather than making sin seem exciting and glorifying it, confessional writers describe its odious effects--both the degradation of character as vice eclipses virtue as well as the dehumanization caused by others through willful abuse and neglect. Human beings, we learn, have an insatiable power to inflict pain that vastly exceeds our ability to comprehend it.

Although writers of spiritual autobiographies have been deeply involved in sins, both in the giving and receiving, the details are typically spared. One need only include that which makes a necessary contribution to the spiritual dynamics and the details may safely excised. Tolstoy in his spiritual autobiography, *Confession*, reduces an extremely contemptible past into a single, powerful paragraph:

I cannot recall those years without horror, loathing and heart-rending pain. I killed people in war, challenged men to duels with the purpose of killing them, and lost at cards; I squandered the fruits of the peasants' toil and then had them executed; I was a fornicator and a cheat. Lying, stealing, promiscuity of every kind, drunkenness, violence, murder--there was not a crime I did not commit; yet in spite of it all I was praised, and my colleagues considered me and still do consider me a relatively moral man.<sup>2</sup>

While he includes every kind of sin, he rightly omits the specifics.

One observes in the literature of confession that the authors have known every sin and temptation common to humankind. This makes their experiences universal and manifests the universal nature of temptation; the power of good confessional literature is that it speaks for every person. St. Paul writes of his mysterious thorn in the flesh and thereby allows each of us to fill in the thorn-in-the-flesh blank for our own life. Surely St. Augustine speaks for all when he prays, “Grant me chastity...but not yet.” St.

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<sup>2</sup>Tolstoy, *Confession*, (New York: W. W. Norton, 1983), David Patterson, translator; p. 18.

Augustine and St. Paul have written confessions that could be mine; I understand their need for redemption precisely because they are speaking for me.

Of course the literature of confession only has authority if it is honest, even about the lifelong battle with wickedness and doubt. One may be rightly suspicious of spiritual writings which facilely turn famous Christians into saints. C. S. Lewis often lamented that people considered him better than he really was because they viewed him through the lenses of his (triumphalist) writings. Lewis was so clever that he could make it seem totally contrary to reason to doubt the existence of both heaven and Narnia. The misleading impression of Lewis's personal virtues could have been easily remedied if his spiritual autobiography had extended beyond his conversion. Only his brutally honest confessions of doubt and anger with God upon the suffering and death of his wife in *A Grief Observed* reveal Lewis for the moral and spiritual mortal that he really was. No glib theodicies suffice when Lewis becomes the sufferer; he curses God, calling him a cosmic sadist and divine vivisectionist. Curiously *A Grief Observed*, his most authentic writing, was published under a pseudonym. One only really understands the genuinely Christian Lewis in this book, not in his earlier autobiography or his other writings.

Although a novel, Frederick Buechner's *Godric*, a compelling spiritual biography of an English pirate who converted to Christianity and was later declared a saint (this much of the story is true), is an honest confession of the lingering power of sin. Buechner's imaginative genius is displayed in his attempt to understand what it must have been like to be transformed from lascivious pirate to reluctant saint. In those days, as Kierkegaard writes, faith was a project for a lifetime. How is one actually set free from one's lusts to genuine and willing obedience to God? For Godric, it was not without a lifetime of kicking and screaming. Godric does not characterize the Christian life as a single dying with resurrection to new life once and for all, but rather he exclaims: "As a man dies many times before he's dead, so does he wend from birth to

birth until, by grace, he comes alive at last.”<sup>3</sup> As a very old man Godric wistfully reflects on the power of the old self over the new self: unable even to lust, he *wishes* that he still could. He describes his state:

How I rage at times to smite with these same fists I scarce can clench! How I long, when woods are green, to lark and leap on shanks grown dry as sticks! Let a maid but pass my way with sport in her eye and her braid a-swinging, and I burn for her although my wick’s long since burnt out....So ever and again young Godric’s dreams well up to flood old Godric’s prayers, or prayers and dreams reach God in such a snarl he has to comb the tangle out, who know which he counts more dear.<sup>4</sup>

Confession is the story of the old self being made new, again and again, by the grace of God. St. Augustine reminds us as well of the persistent power of sin and the perpetual need for grace. As he reflects on his *Confessions*, he asks his readers to see what he is really like and if there be anything praiseworthy in him, to praise the Author of his conversion; and, upon understanding his true nature, he requests: “As, then, you find me in these pages, pray for me that I shall not fail but that I may go on to be perfected.”<sup>5</sup>

Of course it is far easier to write of sins of which one has repented than of those with which one still struggles. Why did Lewis write *A Grief Observed* under a pseudonym? Why is *Godric* a fiction? Why does the vast portion of St. Augustine’s *Confessions* focus on the sins of his pre-conversion days? One gets the mistaken impression that once bathed in the blood of Jesus, one is washed clean from the power of sin. It is important for confessional literature to reveal the foibles of the saints as well as of the former peccadilloes of sinners; is it really all said and done when that first

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<sup>3</sup>Frederick Buechner, *Godric* (San Fransisco: HarperCollins, 1980), p. 99.

<sup>4</sup>Buechner, p. 40.

<sup>5</sup>*Letter to Darius*, Ep. 231 as found in Outler, p. 25.

“Amen” is spoken? Who among us has the courage to admit publicly that we still struggle with persistent sins whose stony grip is so hard to pry from our souls? From whom can we learn that as we die and then rise with Christ, that on our first resurrection day the world is still dark and gloomy and our flesh still clings like choking ivy to our now willing spirit? We need spiritual models not only for the triumphal process of conversion but also for the tedious process of sanctification.

Given the profound influence of human self-deception, one should surely suspect much that is written in any autobiography. The stories and their details have been carefully selected and the overall image has been subtly crafted. If any perception is theory-laden then surely one’s perception of one’s own life is. The powers of self-deception are nearly limitless and the opportunity to publicly recall one’s past surely increases those powers. Who among us would dare include all or even any of our most formative experiences of sin, guilt and shame? Faced with the prospect of public self-disclosure, even the best of us would surely become afflicted with selective amnesia. We needn’t attribute blame to this selection process; we may be constitutionally incapable of easily recalling our true self. But there is a more devious tendency lurking in the neighborhood. There are countless notorious autobiographies which are feeble attempts to sanitize otherwise loathsome lives; self-revelation all too quickly degenerates into self-justification. Some authors have written autobiographies that are whitewashed histories precisely to enshrine a privileged and positive view of themselves. Tolstoy’s masterpiece, for example, ignores his infidelities and the eventual abandonment of his wife. The Tolstoy of his own, enduring recollection is a modern saint. The Tolstoy of a reality hard to recover is a sinner-saint (and mostly the former). Lewis’s autobiography conveniently ignores distasteful details or entire events which have served to enshrine him into St. Lewis even prior to his conversion. Good autobiography demands a revealing, iconoclastic biography (and not one by a devoted follower, as for example, are most of the writer’s of C. S. Lewis’s biographies).

The Bible itself is a treasure trove of confessional literature and is not mute about the struggles of the faithful. Job, for example, in the midst of his anger with God--his intense desire to have his day in court with God as defendant and Job as prosecuting attorney--can still proclaim: "For I know that my Redeemer lives, and at last he will stand upon the earth; and tho worms destroy my body, yet in my flesh shall I see God."<sup>6</sup> The Psalms contain confession of every variety: pious profession of faith, anger that God seems unjust and absent, confession of sin, expressions of gratitude toward God for being steadfast in love and slow to anger, praise of God for his mighty works, pleadings with and cajolings of God, false praise, and so forth. In the painfully honest Psalms we see into the very heart of the authentic religious believer. "Why dost thou hide thy face? Why dost thou forget our affliction and oppression?" Wake up God, the Psalmist screams, and come to our rescue.<sup>7</sup> David, broken and filled with loathing both for himself and his actions after being revealed as a murderer and adulterer, admits his sorry and helpless state and asks for God's severe and purging mercy: "Fill me with joy and gladness; let the bones which thou has broken rejoice."<sup>8</sup> Although Jeremiah, the weary prophet, confesses his anger with God ("O, LORD, thou hast deceived me, and I was deceived; thou art stronger than I, and thou has prevailed." ), he returns to God and place his trust in Him. Yet Jeremiah chafes against the divine inscrutability and curses the day he was born.<sup>9</sup> And it is in St. Paul's sober yet fleeting confessions that we see him as a fellow pilgrim, and not merely a divine vehicle of doctrine, striving as

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<sup>6</sup> Job 19: 25-26. The interpretation of this passage is widely disputed. Does the Redeemer mentioned here refer to God or to something like a defense attorney that will vindicate him against the accusations of God? Or is it a statement of faith, that in spite of his lack of understanding of divine justice, he trusts that God is his Redeemer and, in the end, he shall see God? Either interpretation makes a profound contribution to honest confessional literature.

<sup>7</sup>Psalm 44.

<sup>8</sup>Psalm 51.

<sup>9</sup>Jeremiah 20.

we along the way.

It takes more than honesty to construct a powerful and enduring spiritual autobiography. The story and the life remembered must be interesting. It must appeal to universal sins, temptations, needs, desires and struggles. And in order to avoid egotism and interest only to its author its subject matter must ultimately be God. In the best, there is an intermingling of the personal and the intellectual. While reflecting on what makes life worth living, Tolstoy wanders about in the “forest of human knowledge,” discussing with alacrity and clarity the worldviews of the great philosophers and the Wisdom literature of the Bible. There is an ease with which great autobiography engages the most compelling and profound human questions in an insightful and illuminating manner. The grapplings with faith and reason in an accessible manner by people of prodigious intellect provide encouragement for those struggling with their faith--these intelligent people have struggled with belief in God and come out on the side of God.

Since the time of the Enlightenment there has been a gradual slide in Western academia toward agnosticism and atheism. It would be difficult to underestimate the Academy's escalating hostility to Christianity during the past century. Unbeknownst to the general populace, however, has been the remarkable renaissance of religious belief among intellectuals in the past two decades. The contemporary stories of faith of scientists, philosophers and psychologists have been captured in autobiography and biography. These thinkers, who practice their craft in areas considered most hostile to Christianity, provide us with clues as to why Christian belief is intellectually and emotionally appealing in our postmodern climate of skepticism and relativism.

Treat confessional literature as did Augustine--a prayer of thanksgiving to God who manifests his providential care in the various circumstances of our lives. We should find in great confessional literature some reflection of our lives as seeker, Christian, pilgrim, questioner, thinker, struggler, doubter, and most important as a

sinner in need of grace. May the prayers of these writers prod us to cry out: “LORD, hear *my* prayer.” As Augustine urges of his confessions, may we see the depths from which we cry to God: “For nothing comes nearer to your ears than a confessing heart, and a life grounded in faith.”<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>10</sup>*The Confessions*, Book II, ch. 3.