

The Concept of Confession in Christian Thought: A Critical Study of Saint Augustine

Bammou Ahmed¹, Rahmouni Abdallah²

¹University of Ahmed Draya, Adrar (Algeria). bam.ahmed@univ-adrar.edu.dz

²University of Ahmed Draya, Adrar (Algeria). abdallah.rahmouni@univ-adrar.edu.dz

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Abstract:

Through this study, we aim to demonstrate that confession is not an accusation of the self, but rather a quest for inner happiness and liberation from the shackles of sin. Confession does not remain confined within the limits of the self; rather, it extends beyond to the other or others. When a person wrongs others, he confesses to them to instill in them a sense of respect and appreciation. As for the highest form of confession, Augustine views it as confessing to the Creator with complete sincerity and a firm resolve to abandon all transgressions. Augustine derived the concept of confession from the Christian religion, which establishes confession as one of the fundamental pillars of faith and of returning to God.

Keywords: Confession, Sin, Coexistence, Duty, Right

1. Introduction

The philosophy of confession is considered a human culture present among all peoples and civilizations; it is a human characteristic among humankind. Given that humans are prone to error, the accumulation of errors within the soul causes a person to suffer from feelings of distress and sadness. In this state, the person resorts to discharging what agitates the soul through confession, seeking comfort and tranquillity: “For a person, in all stages of life, needs someone to console him in his affairs. Thus, you see him complaining of his worries and the toils of his soul to a friend or a beloved, seeking their counsel, or relieving a distress, or alleviating pain, or sharing what he feels. How good it is for a person to have a spiritual father and a guiding teacher to whom he can return in his spiritual matters for guidance and direction.” Confession appears in the three revealed religions (Judaism, Christianity, and Islam). These religions have outlined the foundations and principles upon which confession is based, in addition to all universal laws and constitutions that call for the activation of this noble culture. Confession is not an accusation of the self so much as it is a search for inner happiness and liberation from the bonds of sin. Confession does not stop at the boundaries of the self but extends to the other or others. When a person wrongs others, he confesses to them to make them feel respect and appreciation. As for the highest type of confession, Augustine sees it as confessing to the Creator with all sincerity and determination to abandon all errors. Augustine derived the concept of confession from the Christian religion, which makes confession one of the basic pillars of faith and return to God. In this regard, Augustine presents us with a central problem/question:

How does confession contribute to the liberation of the human soul from the bonds of sin? This central problem includes the following sub-questions:

- What are the principles upon which confession is based in Christianity and other religions?
- What is the essence of confession in Augustine's philosophy?
- What are the objectives of confession as a social and human culture?

1. Confession in the Three Religions

a. Confession in Judaism:

It is mentioned in the books of the Old Testament and the heritage of Moses that confession is a duty for the Jewish nation. It is linked to several actions performed by the guilty or erring person, towards God or towards others. Confession in Judaism is considered among the secrets of repentance; a servant's repentance cannot be accepted unless he confesses. It is stated in the Talmud that acknowledgment must be for all sins. Confession in Judaism has been compared to a blood-wit (diya) paid by the confessor, represented by a sacrifice he offers along with many prayers and supplications, confessing his errors to the priest to obtain forgiveness and absolution. "Confession among the Children of Israel is linked to sacrifice and the priest's prayer for sin. Rabbi Ben Ezra said that confession is necessary, and that when they offer a sacrifice, if they do not express sorrow and confess in an orderly manner specifying the sins, the sacrifices would have no power or benefit for them" (Jirjis, 1986, p. 104). Confession in Judaism is compared to material matters, but the goal is not the sacrifice itself; rather, it is for the person to feel that he has committed a sin deserving of repentance.

b. Confession in Christianity :

The Church Fathers in Christianity have unanimously affirmed confession as a process performed by Christian believers regarding the errors they commit. If, according to Christian teachings, a person bears sin, then the idea of salvation, upon which Christian philosophy is based, is contingent upon confession. "It is known that confessions in the Christian sense mean the human's divulgence and confession of his errors and sins to the monk, for the purpose of obtaining forgiveness" (Turki, 2010, p. 144). This confession takes place inside the church to the father who keeps these secrets, and the father issues an indulgence (letter of forgiveness) in exchange for a sum of money paid by the sinner according to the offense committed. However, there is a disagreement on this point, as some fathers do not accept mediation.

"Church history testifies that confession was practiced in two ways: one public and the other secret. In both ways, the forgiveness of sins was granted only by priests who had the right to pronounce it. Over time, the church relinquished public confession out of compassion for its children and restricted it to secret confession" (Jirjis, 1986, p. 107). The concept of confession in Christianity does not differ greatly from the concept in Judaism, except that the source of confession is one, and its path is one: the church. It is a confession based on mediation so that a person can rid himself of his sins. Confession is a process of self-examination.:

c. Confession in Islam:

The values of Islam called for a culture of confession, as clarified by many verses in the Holy Quran and confirmed by the Prophetic Sunnah in many hadiths regarding the value of confession and its role in reforming the human soul. Like other religions, Islam links confession

(acknowledgment of sin) to transgressions. However, Islam eliminates all mediation between the servant and his Creator. Confession in Islam is done directly. The verses indicate a large number of types of confession, the most prominent of which are: confession resulting from disobedience to the Creator, confession regarding an error that causes harm to others, and confession aimed at self-reform.

2. The Concept of Confessions according to Saint Augustine:

Based on his own experience, Augustine attempts to establish the concept of Confessions, which is a product of the experiences he gained during his arduous life. It is a confession that reveals a strong will in Augustine's personality. Many questions have been raised about this personality, especially after he became the bishop of the Church of Hippo.

The high rank Augustine achieved did not prevent him from confessing his errors and desires. However, upon realizing Christian truth, Augustine opened a new page in his intellectual life and managed to change many concepts that had formed obstacles in his path. Augustine's Confessions, in their entirety, are praise and thanks to God, for it is God who illuminated the way for him to reach the truth. Thus, Augustine's confession came as a dialogue with God: "A dialogue with God, a dialogue of trust in Him and faith in Him, with tranquility towards Him and a fondness for personal and direct communication with Him. It is a book about God, from Him, and in Him. It is a quest for God and a hymn to Him, on a path that begins from a tormented soul and ends in an encounter with Him. It is a journey, a course, and a religious experience with its own logic, and its own domain for the believer seeking to know his starting points and presuppositions" (Zayour, 1998, p. 89).

Augustine presented these Confessions as a general critique of his life's journey. It is a confession to others for the sake of emulation, and praise for the Creator, because no matter how many errors the servant commits, he remains weak in the Creator's sight, and thus he presents his confession to embody his inability to bear the many problems that confront him. Confession embodies the extent of trust between the servant and his Creator, especially if this confession emanates from the heart. Augustine went through a difficult period, and therefore we perceive much honesty in his confessions: "He wanted to enlighten hearts with the love of God, ignite hope within them, and lead them to the path of guidance" (Zayour, 1998, p. 88). Through this confession, Augustine presents a sound methodology, urging man not to despair no matter how far he has strayed from God. Determination and will are the sole drivers of change. Happiness, according to Augustine, is an inner feeling achieved through the purity of conscience and the inner self.

3. Motivations for the Confessions:

After discovering the truth of existence and its connection, Augustine realized the depth of the state he had experienced in his life. He describes that stage with great passion and bitterness, for two reasons: Augustine's inclination to commit sins of all kinds without fear or embarrassment, and Augustine's sense of grace and care whenever he strayed from the path of truth.

"I have felt the benefit of my past confessions and realized it. However, many people want to know what state I was in while writing my confessions: among them are those who know me and those who do not. They have heard me or heard about me, but their ear is not attached to my heart, where I truly am, my self. They also want me to confess to them what I am inwardly" (Augustine & John, 1987, p. 195). Augustine found no embarrassment in his confessions, which have sparked much discussion, especially since Augustine wrote these Confessions as a summary of his entire life, despite being the bishop of the Church of Hippo at that stage. Here, Augustine prompts us to raise a question: What are the motivations behind this confession?

a. Psychological Comfort:

Augustine left no act, regardless of its magnitude, without it being a subject of his confession. The Book of Confessions is filled with complaint, passion, pain, and tears. Many of the violations Augustine committed, he found no taste in them except as a habit or to gain friends' approval. "Here is my heart, O my God, it confesses its secret to you, its memories, O my hope, O you who purify me from the defilement of these inclinations, so turn my gaze to you and free my foot from those chains" (Augustine & John, 1987, p. 64).

For the sake of salvation from past sins and the pain of the soul, Saint Augustine was driven to expose what the soul contains in its inner depths. It is a confession arising from a free act, without coercion or pressure, stemming from the very core of the heart with a rare will. He affirms the sincerity of his intentions by saying, "I speak the truth, for no one knows what is in a person except the spirit of the person within him" (Augustine & John, 1987, p. 193). This is an attempt by Augustine to delve into the depths of his soul to reveal its truth. This confession is not intended for boasting; rather, it is a call to reform himself first, and then to offer a lesson to others. Many people lack the courage to disclose what goes through their minds. According to Augustine, they are incapable of disclosing even to themselves, let alone offering a confession to people or a complaint to God, although Augustine often refused that his confession be a complaint to people. What can people advance or delay if they hear my confessions? Rather, it is a confession to God, who, before I confess to Him, knows what my soul contains. "If I am wicked, my confession to You is grief, distress, and sorrow. If I am righteous, my confession is not self-glorification, for You, O Lord, bless the righteous after his justification from his sin. Thus, my confession to You, O my God, is silent and not silent: my voice is silent, my heart cries out, and every truth I speak before people, You have heard from me, and You hear from me only what You have previously taught me" (Augustine & John, 1987, p. 193).

The acknowledgment accompanied by remorse and regret expresses the extent of Augustine's affliction by the consequences of the acts he committed. Although Christian thought acknowledges confession within the church to the priest, Augustine's confession was without mediation. We do not find a mediator between him and God in the Book of Confessions; rather, he directs this confession directly to the Creator. Augustine used all methods of complaint, sorrow, and expression of remorse. It is an elevated dialogue with God, revealing Augustine's mastery of rhetorical styles. This is what granted Augustine's Confessions a great rank in Roman literature and Christian thought.

b. Achieving Knowledge of God:

The purpose of Augustine's Confessions is not merely to narrate the stations of his life, but rather they are confessions with a spiritual dimension, a psychological dimension, and social value.

The spiritual dimension is manifested in addressing God silently, from the depths of conscience. Confession is considered one of the methods of inner truth: "My God, even if I am compelled to convince others of my desire without revealing what I want or achieving my goal, I express my inner feelings with sighs, cries, and various movements" (Augustine & John, 1987, p. 87). We conclude that Augustine's Confessions emanate from inner sense. It is a confession that does not only include errors; there is another positive aspect of Augustine's personality that he confesses to, which is his ability to discover the errors he fell into. This aspect is not considered by many in his confessions.

As for the social value of the Confessions, Saint Augustine conveys a message whose essence and foundation is trust between the servant and his Creator. Achieving certain knowledge of God makes a person exclude others from his calculations, intimate conversations, and confessions. The reader of the Book of Confessions realizes a truth: this confession passed through two stages:

1. The Stage of Fear and Doubt:

This is the first stage in which a person turns to his Creator to express his errors. According to Augustine, this stage is filled with fear, doubt, and hesitation. This is clearly evident from the first chapters of the book: "I confess to You, O Great Lord, saying, have mercy on me, O Lord, and take care of me with Your providence, for I have sinned before You. I say this not so that we may misuse Your forgiveness and take evil lightly, but so that we may remember the Teacher's word: Your health is good, so do not sin, lest sin drag you to something worse than that" (Augustine & John, 1987, p. 59)

The source of fear between the servant and his Creator at this stage is the gravity and heinousness of the acts committed by the person. The confession at this stage is heavy and incomplete; that is, the confessor hides many of the things he has committed. This is what Augustine calls apparent confession, meaning that the confession includes only apparent matters. This type of confession suggests that the person has not reached the stage of delving into the depths of the soul and revealing its inner contents, because this type of error is what affects the person's life.

2. The Stage of Trust

This is the stage in which a person arrives at true confession. It is a confession based on complete trust between the person and his Creator. In this stage, the inner self is discovered. When a person reaches the inner truth, which Augustine considers a continuous, uninterrupted current/feeling between the person and his Creator, his confession is based on love. The person must cultivate a feeling of love between himself and his Creator, for the soul, through love, gains comfort and tranquility. This love is what removes the mask of fear and hesitation. Despite this, the Creator's love precedes the servant's love: "O eternal truth and true eternal

love, You are my God; to You I sigh night and day. As soon as I knew You for the first time, You raised me to You to show me what I must see, without me being able to do so. You dazzled my weak eyes with Your bright radiance, and I trembled with sacred love and fear" (Augustine & John, 1987, p. 135).

This type of confession arises from love, in which the soul soars towards the Creator. Connection occurs between the luminous ray and the soul, granting the soul strength and immunity, making the person acknowledge his actions with full confidence. This type of connection occurs through mystical contemplation, in which a person excludes his self, uniting with the Divine Self, even though Augustine's mysticism was a practical, realistic mysticism, in Ali Zayour's expression: "Regarding Saint Augustine, his mysticism, if one may say, is based on a practical, realistic foundation. He did not renounce the world in his life, nor did he reject work and activity. This is true mysticism, one that illuminates reality without rejecting or renouncing it, and which constantly oscillates in a back-and-forth movement from reality to ideals and vice versa" (Zayour, 1998, p. 64).

Many researchers have considered Augustine a Christian mystic; however, he was realistic in addressing many issues, concerning himself with many topics outside theological discourse, especially those related to the soul, the problem of time and history, and responding to his opponents with logical arguments.

Thus, Augustine's mysticism was scientific and practical, contributing to many intellectual creations in the Middle Ages. He was not known for isolation except at the very end of his life. For this reason, he always called for a person to live inner sublimity, while on the external level, he was an ordinary person. This is clearly evident in the Confessions.

4. The Role of Confessions in the Purification of the Heart

Spiritual and moral purity represents, for Augustine, the essence of his philosophy, which is based on illumination and inspiration. Based on this, knowledge through illumination (epistemic illumination) occurs through the way of the heart, as the spiritual source that illuminates within the person and his inner self. Faith also occurs through the heart because it is the place of assent and belief. "But the Christian Augustine was not satisfied with the authority of the intellect; rather, he called for the authority of the heart, inner light, divine influx, and the eye of insight" (Uwaydah & Sheikh, 1993, p. 41).

He believes that knowledge of the heart is direct knowledge in which observation and disclosure are manifested. On this basis, Augustine called for purifying the heart from all types of envy, malice, and hatred because they veil direct vision from the person. "The correct sense is not acquired by the heart except after a long and dangerous journey, which is that a person struggles against himself and disciplines himself to turn to God alone and seek refuge in Him in all matters" (Al-Mousawi, 2012, p. 40). He called for the values of love, which increase the clarity of heart vision and purity of conscience. Many people carry an outward appearance completely contradictory to their inner selves, and thus happiness is not achieved for them, and they live in constant anxiety. Therefore, the path Augustine drew for the purification of the heart is sincere faith, which he found in Christian teachings. "In Christianity, the intellect unites with the heart, vision with witnessing, and speech with the tongue. With heartfelt faith, sensory

barriers dissolve in the presence of divine vision" (Augustine & John, 1987, p. 40). Augustine affirms that confession of the heart is what guarantees continuity and union with God, because the reality of this confession is sincerity. A person can hide many things from people, but he cannot hide them from the Creator, for He has prior knowledge of it. Confession is a continuous process for the purification of the heart and constant connection with the Creator. "To You, my heart, O my God. To You, that heart which You had mercy upon in the depths of the abyss. Behold, it confesses to You today what it was doing there when it took evil as a garment it wore for free; its only goal was to feed its malice and wickedness with evil" (Augustine & John, 1987, p. 34).

Augustine presents a confession in the mystical manner, which makes spiritual discipline a purification of the heart for the sake of ascending through spiritual stations. The mystic always strives for the purification of the heart; thus, confession is a type of spiritual discipline.

5. The Relationship of Confession to Truth:

The word confession suggests to the soul that there is something inside the person that he wishes to disclose, either to others, to himself, or to his Creator. From this door, confession is related to truth. "This explanation does not disturb me, whether it is true or artificial, it never disturbs me because I was very happy as I approached the confessional with a broken heart, where a simple, gentle priest accepts my confession, witnesses my repentance, and casts off the burdens of sin" (Bashir, 2015, p. 113). It carries many meanings because it results from accumulations inside the soul.

Undertaking to write the Confessions is a testimony that history will record about the confessor. If it is true, this confession will remain the best witness for you. If it is otherwise, it is self-deception and disrespect towards others.

Although Augustine's confession appears to be a confession about his personality, it is nonetheless a general confession about the philosophy of the Middle Ages. It is a critical study of Roman society and Christian philosophy.

6. Augustine's Confessions on Education within the Roman Family and Society

In this stage, Augustine informs us about the nature of education within the Christian family and the nature of formation in the Roman school, the methods of teaching, and the subjects in which the student was formed. "They put me in school seeking knowledge, and I was foolish, so I found no benefit in it. Moreover, if I was lazy, they beat me. The elders considered beating as an excellent method in education" (Augustine & John, 1987, p. 16). Those in charge of education in Roman society found no embarrassment in punishment. Additionally, the curriculum included all the arts, such as Roman literature, stories of heroes, legends of kings and their wars. Roman society glorified wars and had a great interest in theater. However, the moral aspect in Roman society had no weight, according to Augustine. It was a society in which revelry and taverns abounded and placed no value on women. "For example, they forced me to memorize the conquests of Aeneas, me who forgot my own misdeeds. And who knows who Aeneas is? They forced me to weep for the dead Dido, who committed suicide under the influence of love" (Augustine & John, 1987, p. 20). Despite all this, the Roman school,

alongside its interest in Latin literature, did not neglect the Greek heritage and philosophy. School hours were filled with lessons on Homer, the ideas of Plato and Aristotle. This was reflected in Saint Augustine's culture, as the Roman school mixed Latin culture with Greek thought and Christian theological thought.

Thus, this confession included the methods of education within Roman society and informed us about the reality of the Roman Empire, which steered the world for many years.

7. Augustine's Confession as a Critical Study of Greek and Medieval Thought

Augustine received his education in Roman schools and institutes, from Medora in Rome to Carthage and then to Milan. These were centers of cultural radiance in the Middle Ages, concerned with the study of philosophy and Christian theology in the medieval period. Despite what has been said about the era and its culture, it was a meeting point of civilizations par excellence. It was an era that witnessed many intellectual cross-fertilizations (Greek thought, Roman thought, Christian thought, and Islamic thought). It was an era that witnessed a dialogue between religious, faith-based discourse and rational, philosophical discourse within the framework of the general problem of that era (reason and faith).

Any analytical study of the schools of the Middle Ages necessitates delving into the religious domain. Religion in that era imposed itself as an intellectual, civilizational, and human structure. This reality was capable of creating intellectual giants whose ideas remain subjects of study and critique to this day.

Seeking the truth in such an era requires intellectual toil and deep investigation into all the theories that imposed themselves on that era. "We look at ourselves within the context of what surrounds us, considering ourselves beings trying to uncover the secrets of existence" (Jadidi, 2009, p. 56). This is reflected in the reality of Saint Augustine: "He successively journeyed through the Holy Scriptures, Manichaeism, Academic Skepticism, Neoplatonism, and Christianity. Therefore, it is better to speak of Augustine's transformations rather than a single transformation, meaning that reaching the confession required several years" (Zayour, 1998, p. 20). Augustine's Confessions suggest tracking the truth from all its sources, beginning with the Holy Scriptures, whose wording seemed strong to him, then to Manichaean thought, in which he settled for nine full years, by his own admission in the Book of Confessions, from there to the truth of the Skeptics for three years, then he joined Neoplatonism as the comprehensive school of medieval thought, which Augustine considered the gateway to returning to Christianity, in which he finally settled. The Confessions document informs us of the entirety of medieval thought and Augustine's method in searching for inner truth.

8. Conclusion

Research into the concept of confession in every era involves many mechanisms that reveal its true essence, based on the foundations established by the researcher regarding the goals of confession and the motives that can put the human soul to the test of truth.

The confession sought by Saint Augustine is a type of psychological liberation that shackles and confines the human soul, making it a hostage to the body and imprisoned by its desires. The culture of confession is a type of moral and literary courage, indicative of the soul's purity

and its liberation from its desires. It is a type of human and social communication with others to guarantee their rights and respect their feelings.

Confessing the other means acknowledging his religion, culture, and privacy. According to this confession, all live in peace and security without exclusion or marginalization. Confession is not dictated by the logic of interest as much as by the moral duty that drives us towards it, because it stems from a particular creed. It is not specific to Christianity; rather, all revealed religions, as well as moral and civil laws that call for the values of justice, equality, and respect for the rights of others, share in calling for it. Despite the Christian perspective from which Saint Augustine addressed the concept of confession and its practice as a religious rite, the concept has political, social, and legal dimensions that can contribute to addressing many contemporary issues and problems.

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