

TRANSLATING SIN TO CATHOLIC SAINTHOOD: TRACING SELF CHANGE IN CONFESSIONS

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Abstract:

Augustine's life history as chronicled in his famous Confessions has been an all-time popular read and canonical classic ever since it was written. The work reflects Augustine's transformation from a youth consumed by desire to becoming a Catholic monk and saint. Many factors have contributed to this transformation. The various translations of Confessions, from Latin to English are looked into, along with an examination of the 'confession' which can be traced in the text. But most importantly, this article tries to bridge the famous theorist Foucault and Augustine through the "Other-Victorian hypothesis." Intriguingly, Augustine is absent in Foucault. Though these two stalwarts of the Western world lie sixteen centuries apart, they share a great deal of common ground. Yet modern readers are able to identify with both, though in different ways. This article ultimately tries to give a Foucauldian dimension to Confessions, trying to trace the evolving personality of Augustine with the help of Foucault's theory of Sexuality.

Keywords: Confession, Augustine, Foucault, self-change, Other-Victorian Hypothesis.

Introduction

Saint Augustine. The man who journeyed from sin to sainthood; the Christian theologian whose contributions to the larger heritage of Western civilization are hardly less important than his services to the Christian Church; the man who was far and away the best- if not the very first - psychologist in the ancient world - such are the epithets and phrases one uses to describe the author of the oldest acknowledged autobiography in the world. Born Aurelius Augustinus, on the 13th of November, 354 A.D., at Tagaste, North Africa, to Patricius and Monica, Augustine is best known for his *Confessions*. "Which of my shorter works has been more widely known or given greater pleasure than the [thirteen] books of my Confessions?" says Augustine of his work (Augustine xii-xiii). The popularity of this fourth Century work, appreciated as a classic, even 1600 years hence may lie in the fact that even the average modern reader, as Rex Warner points out, is able to trace his or her own "epic journey" in the book- the "journey" may not necessarily be to find God. This is what seems to make it relevant even today.

Translating Confessions

Augustine is one of the precious few ancient figures who recorded a great deal of information about their life and times. He began composing *Confessions* at the threshold of his career in the Church, completing them probably in 398 A.D. *Confessions* not only traces Augustine's spiritual journey to salvation; it also offers a detailed account of his life and experiences up to his conversion. It not only provides theologians with valuable insight into the background and influences of Augustine's thought; historians find in it important information on life in the Roman Empire at the close of the 4th century. The first nine books contain a general sketch of his early life, conversion, and of his return to Africa in his thirty-fourth year. The last three books and a part of the tenth book are devoted to speculative philosophy. They oppose Manichæanism and try to reason on metaphysical questions like the possibility of knowing God and the nature of space and time. Schaff finds this done in the style of the typical allegorical exegesis usual with the Fathers, but strange to our age; they are therefore of little value to the general reader, except as

showing that even abstract metaphysical subjects may be devotionally treated (12).

Originally written in Latin, the first translation of *Confessions* into English was made by a Catholic priest and convert to the Church, Sir Tobie Matthew (1577-1655), son of the Protestant Archbishop of York, friend of Lord Bacon and the translator of his *Essays* into Italian. His translation may be looked upon as a contribution to the Counter Reformation. First published with copious apologetic and controversial notes in London in 1620, it was republished without the notes in Paris, in 1628. It is free and not always accurate. Dom Roger Hudleston O.S.B has published a revision of the Matthew translation (London, 1923), which has proved popular and gone through several printings. In 1631, William Watts, an Anglican clergyman, published a new version which was partly based on Sir Tobie Matthew's work and was partly a new translation. A revision of Watts was done in 1912 by W.H.D. Rouse, for the Loeb Classical Library. Abraham Woodhead, a convert to the Church, published a new translation in London in 1676.

As one of the activities of the Tractarian movement, John Henry Newman, John Keble and Edward Bouverie Pusey planned and began a great Library of the Fathers, to be made up of English translations of certain chief classics of the early Church. To this library, Pusey contributed a translation of the *Confessions*, based on the seventeenth-century Benedictine edition of the original text and on Matthew and Watts in English. First published in London in the year 1838, it has gone through several editions. It is an able work and has been very influential on subsequent translators. Newman was concerned that Pusey should not be rigorously literal in his translation, but whether he had a more direct hand in Pusey's English rendering of *Confessions*, is not clear. Other translations have been by J.G. Pilkington (London 1876), Frank J. Sheed (London and New York, 1944), Vernon J. Bourke (New York, 1953), a very literal translation done with the "special editorial work of Dr. Bernard M. Peebles," of the Catholic university of America, and Albert C. Outler (Philadelphia, 1955). A version of Books 1-9 made by Charles Bigg (London 1897), has been popular but it so free that it is difficult to classify it as a translation. Outler finds no need to justify a new English translation of the work as each translation is first and foremost, an "approximation" and an "interpretation" as well. It is impossible, as it is with all translations, to have a perfect translation. Augustine's style is such that there is no way to equal the complex and brilliant original (21).

How "Confessional" is *Confessions*

Confessions finds its place in the history of literature as the first ever autobiographical work. M.H. Abrams defines an autobiography as "...a biography written by the subject about himself or herself" (22). He delineates it from a memoir which does not stress on the author's developing self and from a diary or journal which was not meant for publication. It would be impossible to put *Confessions*, a work of the fourth century, into the category of an 'autobiography', which fully evolved as a genre only in these recent years. Abrams himself calls it the first and the most influential "spiritual autobiography" (22). But various translators of *Confessions*, including Garry Wills, Outler and Pilkington simply refuse to call it an autobiography. Garry Wills prefers to call it *The Testimony*, which goes beyond the idea of the confession of sin or the profession of faith. Others prefer to call it a long prayer moving with a "prayerful momentum" finally ending with *Amen*, as all prayers do (Marty xx). But Marty points out to a common fact pointed out by all revisers i.e., if it actually could be considered an autobiography, it was a path breaker for all such works (xxii). A lot is left out by Augustine. Outler finds Augustine to be tracing the windings of his memory, as it "re-presents the upheavals of his youth and the stages of his disorderly quest for wisdom" (17).

Absence of Augustine in Foucault

The absence of Augustine in Foucault is, in fact surprising; Augustine is neither discussed nor scarcely ever in other writings of Foucault dealing with the early Christian period. This seems particularly strange since Foucault is concerned with the history of confessional discourses and Augustine, considered the father of confessional writing, is certainly the figure who looms largest for this and perhaps for any

period. Chloe Taylor comments on this aspect: “The near absence of Augustine may be partially explained by Foucault's concern to do original archival research for each of his studies, rather than relying on well-known philosophical and historical texts and the secondary literature on them” (27).

Bridging Foucault and Augustine: The Other Victorian Hypothesis

Foucault elaborates on the attitude of the modern society to sexuality. Before the advent of the Victorian age, sexuality was spoken of openly, without any inhibitions. The 'illicit' was more or less tolerated to a great extent. There never arose a need to hide one's sexuality in an age of “direct gestures, shameless discourse and open transgressions... when bodies 'made a display of themselves'” (Foucault 3). Bawdy remarks were not uncommon, speaking of sex was not considered a sin and one never needed to feel guilty about the sexual act or a discourse loaded with sexual innuendo. Sexuality was not only for the “legitimate and procreative couple,” who took control later on (3). In the seventeenth century, “anatomies were shown and intermingled at will” (4). Pre-marital and extra-marital affairs were heard and spoken of. Such was the morality of the seventeenth century, with no censorship in discourse or action.

With the passage of time, Foucault explains how there came a change in this free attitude. Sexuality began to be “repressed”. Efforts were made in every possible way to censor statements and to control words or statements with double meanings (18). The Victorian society considered the married couple as the model; they were the only ones who were eligible to indulge in sexuality. Secrecy was the norm. Direct reference to sex was considered an offence and was spoken of only in hushed tones. Children born out of wedlock were looked at with disgust and “other” kinds of sexuality including homosexuality were looked askance at (4). 'Improper sexual acts'- premarital and extra-marital sex and homosexuality- were classified according to norms and if such behaviour dared to make itself visible, they would have to pay the price for it. The deviant category would be condemned and considered non-existent. There were places to take care of them. Therefore, if one spoke of sex, it would be a scandal, a deliberate breaching of codes which tried to cover up sexuality. Foucault points out that a high market value is attached to such scandalous discourses, given in a manner of revolt (7). Considering the fact that sexuality was a taboo subject, it is worth questioning that people were willing to listen to such “forbidden discourses.” The reason why they listened to it, even if it was a sin was that “... it smacks of revolt, of promised freedom of the coming age of a different law” (7). The listeners hope that an age with moral standards resembling the seventeenth century was on its way. The conversion of Augustine, his transformation into a new person, was not a sudden process; various factors combined to make him so. It is possible to trace how a transformation came over Augustine, the change in personality resembling the so-called morality of the Pre-Victorian and Post-Victorian eras; the standards of morality made use of here are for the sole purpose of measuring the scale of change in him.

Transformation in Augustine- The Two Personalities

We find in the personality of Augustine these two binary opposite views of sexuality in the course of his life as revealed through *Confessions*, both the seventeenth century and Victorian standards of morality- one too lax and the other too stringent.

a) The 'Pre-Victorian' Augustine

The characteristics of seventeenth century morality correspond to the Augustine, before conversion. In his boyhood, Augustine took to stealing and telling lies for various reasons- deceiving his tutors and parents or for the sake of earning respect among his friends or for the sake of “sheer gluttony” (23). The small sins continued on to a larger frame in his youth: “...these same sins...as years pass by, become related no longer to tutors, school masters, footballs, nuts, and pet sparrows, but to magistrates and kings, gold, estates, and slaves...” (23). He admits that he even took a certain pride in sinning, envying those who refrained from doing so. There was an anxiety to please others, bragging in front of them and also to please himself.

He craved for love. As he proceeded from teenage to youth, desires of the flesh began to gain power

over him. He calls it “the bubblings of first manhood” (25). His mind was so confused that he did not know to differentiate between “the clear calm of love and the swirling mists of lust”(25). The only thing he knew was that his thirst for love and carnal desires had to be satisfied by any means, right or wrong. But in his unstable age, he did not consider any possibility of curbing such desires; the then “pre-Victorian” mind of Augustine was confused. He ignores his mother's repeated “warnings” that he should not commit adultery(29). Since he was not “bound” in any way by marriage, which his parents delayed considering it to be an impediment to his academic performance, Augustine felt his “reins” being loosened: “... I was given free play with no kind of severity to control me and was allowed to dissipate myself in all kinds of ways” (30). He did not consider marriage to be “honourable” at this stage (119). A rich wife would quench his lust and also help him in decreasing his expenses. He found himself unable to escape or deprive himself of a woman's embrace. His lax way of life kept him trapped in the “disease of the flesh” and “its deadly sweetness” (119). Meanwhile, his partner was separated from him, as she was considered an obstacle to his marriage. This proved to be a severe blow. The wound caused by the separation was deep, as it had become a habit: “From a perverse will came lust, and slavery to lust became a habit, and the habit being constantly yielded to, became a necessity”(158). Augustine's unrestricted standards of living made him impatient and he was unable to restrain himself from sex until his marriage: “I had two years to wait until I could have the girl to whom I was engaged... I could not bear the delay. I was not so much a lover of marriage... I found another woman for myself-not... a wife. In this way my soul's disease was fed and kept alive...” (127). “Beautiful bodies”, gold and silver were all pleasing to the eye in the first stage. The broad path of the world was alluring to him. In the second stage, comes the realization that all these things were the cause for sin (31).

b) The 'Victorian' Augustine

It is only in the second phase- post-conversion, in the ‘Victorian’ phase of his life, that he considered lust to be a sin, the lust in which he had earlier found great satisfaction. He becomes “aware” that lust was a sin against God, something which earned great punishment; relationship with God is damaged by “the perversity of lust”(Augustine 49). He realizes that only a “confessing heart” would be able to come closer to God (27). Sin was committed for worldly things (31). He considers himself to be a “wasteland” for having slipped away from God, for going “astray”(37). The stealing of pears was the first sin committed and they seemed to taste sweeter as they were stolen (33). This sweetness encourages him to embark on a life of wrongs. Crime, he realizes, was loved for its own sake (35) and everything forbidden was enjoyed due to the precise reason that they were forbidden (34). He also attempts to place the blame of sinning on “others” who committed the sin along with him and tries to prove that he would not have committed them alone (36). It was then that he moved to Carthage and began to yearn for a risky life. The idea of love thrilled him. The “sizzling and frying of unholy loves” (38) around him was the awakening of carnal passions. He admits that: “It was a sweet thing to me both to love and to be loved, and more sweet still when I was able to enjoy the body of my lover...”(38). His life was full of worldly feelings and fancies: “...I lived a life in which I was seduced and seducing, deceived and deceiving, the prey of various desires”(56).

In this stage, he found stage plays to have provided “fuel” for the fire of passion which had been raging within him. He was still unacquainted with the Apostolic Scriptures, which were instrumental in changing his perspective from free to orthodox. He was at this point unable to see anything “further than bodies.” “At that time I was ignored...in my blindness I blamed...holy Fathers who not only behaved in their own times as God commanded...but also foretold times as revealed by God” (48-49). Many things praised by men were abominable in God's eyes (52) and lust was one among them. Monica's dream of Augustine's salvation had left a deep impact on his mind and had sown the seeds of change for this stage. He had a pre-marital relationship with a woman who was not his legal wife. Marriage was legal, restraining and was entered for the sake of having children, while sexual relationship outside marriage was a pact of

mutual understanding between two people who did not want to have children.

Bishop Ambrose was another person who was responsible for pushing Augustine into the 'Victorian' stage. His "worldwide reputation" attracted Augustine but his celibacy seemed to be too much of a burden to him (102). Catholicism demanded the celibacy of its priests and bishops. It also endorsed strict rules of sexuality; sex outside marriage was a sin. He had begun to accept the Catholic religion in small degrees. All vain desires began to be left behind but worldly matters and objects seemed too sweet and precious to be sacrificed. With time and experience, he grew weary of wealth and wisdom and positions. Yet, living with a woman was something he was unable to forgo. He desired a change, but a change would require complete submission before God, a sacrifice of everything worldly. He feared that God would hear his prayer to make him "chaste" as soon as He heard it: "I was afraid that you might hear me too soon and cure me too soon from the disease of a lust which I preferred to be satisfied rather than extinguished"(164). Worldly pleasures held him back. The thought of marriage no longer excited him. Shame, guilt and repentance reach its full height and break loose as he began weeping bitterly in the garden next to his lodging. Inspired by a divine revelation, he reads Romans 13:13 - "Not in rioting and drunkenness, not in chambering and wantonness, not in strife and envying, but put ye on the Lord Jesus Christ, and make not provision for the flesh in concupiscence." This changes his life permanently and dispels all his doubts. He decided to give up everything, even the desires of the flesh. This is the point where he changes completely into the 'Victorian' standpoint of a strict control on his sexuality.

In Book IX Chapter 6, we find him acknowledging his son Adeodatus, but as begotten by him in his sin: "...for I myself had no part in that boy except for the sin"(185). He tries to do penance for his sin by trying to bring Adeodatus up as a Christian and baptizing him. Marriage now becomes the rule and sex outside marriage could in no way be tolerated. In a tribute to his mother in Book IX Chapter 9, he specifically calls his mother honourable as she had lived her life as the wife of one man- a chaste wife. As he reviews his life incidents, he thinks that if there had been someone to direct him, he would have extinguished his sexual passions on marriage instead of lust. Sex would not have been a sin then. It was only through marriage that "lawful" children were begotten. Celibacy would have been the best option if one wanted to be closer to God. A sexual relationship is equated with worldly life and remaining unmarried would help one come even closer to God. Lust took him away from God's presence as it was 'forbidden' by Him; it was "madness", according to the new 'Victorian' Augustine. The 'rein' tightens around him. This 'rein' could be equated with the following influences- the teachings of the Catholic Church, the advice of his mother Monica, Bishop Ambrose and his fellow Christian brethren, like Simplicianus, who led a Christian life. These influences advocated marriage to be the only legitimate outlet for one's sexuality. Physical desire became "dirt" which led him through the "dark hell of lust"(38). The shame he felt for not satisfying these carnal pleasures is replaced by guilt at having committed them. He recognizes the signs or 'warnings' which went unheeded. He felt that if he had paid attention to these warnings at an earlier stage, his life would have taken a different turn. The relationship with his concubine was not "lawful marriage", though Adeodatus was born out of this relation. He had been faithful to her during the course of their relationship. Sins of impurity were committed as his carnal pleasures went unbridled and his soul was not illumined by the light of God which was capable of driving sin away (73). Sexuality now came to be defined by the 'Victorian' Augustine as the "duty of a controlled association and of having children" through marriage (119), it was mere lust which gave pleasure and ecstasy for the 'Pre-Victorian' Augustine. His "abominable youth" now became a thing of the past (124). Augustine radically transforms from an indulgent carefree man to an individual who was acutely aware of the consequences of such a life. If the "carefree man" was guiltless, the latter was guilt-ridden, vowing never to return to his former self. Every wrong doing had to be reckoned for and hence care should be taken that no sin was committed. Marriage which was earlier a bondage now becomes the rule, though he himself decided to renounce everything worldly, even his previous carnal associations which kept him from transforming.

Conclusion

Confessions traces the kind of evolution that Augustine's personality went through, from a person who hardly cared about what he did, to an austere person who completely abstained from worldly pleasures. A confessional would be the space where a sinner could unburden himself of his guilt. Augustine did not confess in a confessional as God Himself was his confessor and his confession was not to be heard by God alone, but his brethren who wished to follow his path. Besides relieving himself of guilt, a confession was a panacea for his soul's disease.

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