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**Susan Wise Bauer: The Art of the Public Grovel**

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# INTRODUCTION

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## FROM PRIVATE TO PUBLIC CONFESSION

ON THE EVENING of August 17, 1998, Bill Clinton faced the American public with an embarrassing admission. Despite earlier denials, he had indeed been carrying on with a White House intern twenty years his junior. “I did have a relationship with Miss Lewinsky that was not appropriate,” he said. “In fact, it was wrong. . . . I know that my public comments and my silence about this matter gave a false impression. I misled people, including even my wife. I deeply regret that.”

He regretted it even more when the House of Representatives impeached him for perjury. But two months later, the Senate voted to acquit him. His approaches to evangelical leaders before and leading up to a White House prayer breakfast succeeded in garnering him public expressions of support from superstar ministers Gordon MacDonald and Tony Campolo, among others. He left office with a 65 percent approval rating, higher than any other departing president in history; five years later, another poll found that he was not only more popular than the incumbent president, but was also considered more honest.<sup>1</sup> His autobiography, released in 2004, sold more than 400,000 copies in hardback; he won a Grammy for the audiobook version, which he read himself. In 2006, he received several honorary doctorates, as well as the Fulbright Prize for International Understanding. In that same year, Hillary Clinton’s staff told the *Atlantic Monthly* that the ex-President was encouraged to stay away from his wife’s fundraising events, since it was impossible to keep media attention away from him and on the Senator.

Four years after Clinton’s admission, an entirely different sort of confession unfolded in front of a much less receptive

crowd of listeners. On November 3, 2002, Bernard Cardinal Law faced his congregation at the Cathedral of the Holy Cross in Boston and told them, “I did assign priests who had committed sexual abuse. . . . I acknowledge my own responsibility for decisions which led to intense suffering. . . . I ask forgiveness in my name and in the name of those who served before me.”

But this confession did not redeem Cardinal Law in the eyes of either his flock or his colleagues. A public call by other priests for Law’s resignation forced him to step down just four weeks after his Holy Cross confession. He also resigned his position as chairman of the board of The Catholic University of America, then left the United States and moved to Rome.

Clinton’s success and Law’s failure signal the final stages of a massive shift. At the end of the twentieth century, Americans increasingly expected their erring leaders to publicly admit their sin and ask for forgiveness. Even as evangelicals complained about their diminishing influence in America,<sup>2</sup> the evangelical ritual of public confession assumed center stage in secular American culture.

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Apology and confession are not the same. An apology is an expression of regret: *I am sorry*. A confession is an admission of fault: *I am sorry because I did wrong. I sinned*.

In the last few years, public figures have apologized with increasing frequency. But these apologies often serve as red herrings, drawing the eye and ear away from the missing confession. “I got heckled and took it badly and went into a rage,” comedian Michael Richards said in 2006, after hurling profanities at black patrons in a comedy club. “I’m deeply, deeply sorry.” There was no admission of wrongdoing here, merely a description of the evening’s happenings, along with an apology. “My intent . . . was to tell what happened on the mountain as accurately and as honestly as possible,” journalist Jon Krakauer wrote, at the end of his best-selling Mount Everest memoir, *Into Thin Air*; “and I apologize to those who feel wounded by my words.” This is not confession, but rather apology as self-defense. An apology, as

psychiatrist Aaron Lazare has pointed out, can be made when there is no real sin involved (“I am sorry that I tore the sweater you lent me” acknowledges nothing more than misfortune); an apology may even be made by someone who has not erred, on behalf of those who *have* (as when an American president apologizes for slavery, or a German chancellor for the Holocaust).<sup>3</sup>

Confession is harder. Confession requires that the accused give up innocence and self-defense, taking moral responsibility for an evil act. Apologies can be made with ease, but confessions are painful.

The high-profile sinners driven to public confession in contemporary America—Jimmy Swaggart, Bill Clinton, Bernard Cardinal Law—had already been judged guilty by the public, well before their confessions. No one doubted that Bill Clinton’s cigars had been where they ought not, or that Cardinal Law had shuffled priests from parish to parish to avoid embarrassment, and worse.

But their followers, already convinced as to guilt, *needed to hear them say, “I have sinned.”*

As it evolved in the twentieth century, the public confession came to serve a very particular purpose. It became a ceremonial laying down of power, made so that followers could pick that power up and hand it back. American democratic expectations have woven themselves into the practice of public confession, transforming it from a vertical act between God and a sinner into a primarily horizontal act, one intended to rebalance the relationship between leaders and their followers. We both idolize and hate our leaders; we need and resent them; we want to submit, but only once we are reassured that the person to whom we submit is no better than we are. Beyond the demand that leaders publicly confess their sins is our fear that we will be overwhelmed by their power.

So it is no coincidence that every one of the high-profile confessions occupying front pages in the 1970s and beyond has involved men accused of predatory behavior: Edward Kennedy, Jim Bakker (not Tammy Faye), Jimmy Swaggart, Bill

Clinton (not Monica Lewinsky), Cardinal Law. The search for similar demands made on women to confess reveals that, barring a few admissions of employing illegal immigrants, women have not felt the same pressure to come forward publicly and admit wrongdoing.

Furthermore, these men, all of whom held positions of legal or moral power, were each accused not only of predatory behavior but of predatory *sexual* behavior. Financial misdealings, when folded into the mix, merely intensified suspicion that these leaders were victimizing their supporters. But the *sexual* sins of these men were the offenses that caused followers to fear that they would be deceived and exploited by those to whom they had willingly granted power.

Before the twentieth century, it had been possible for leaders accused of sexual sins to reassure their supporters without resorting to public confession. But by the century's end, confession was a ritual that permeated American public life. Even Catholic priests and secular politicians found themselves pressured into public confession by followers who were neither evangelical nor Protestant. Public confession had become the most powerful means by which leaders acknowledged the power of their followers.

The path from confession as a private act to confession as a public ritual stretches from the Fourth Lateran Council of 1215 all the way to Oprah Winfrey. Confession of sin, an act originally intended to repair the relationship between God and sinner, was at first practiced in privacy; only a priest, bound to secrecy by the seal of the confessional, served as witness. Post-Reformation, confession of sin took up a supporting role in the conversion narratives of English Puritans, where it helped to reassure the Puritan believer of the reality of his faith. As part of a conversion story, confession of sin was done publicly; the whole purpose of the conversion narrative was to testify, before the gathered saints, to the reality of the conversion.

In colonial American Puritanism, and later in the hands of American revivalists, the confession of sin went through

additional transformations. It was detached from the conversion narrative to stand alone. It still took place within sacred spaces, but it became increasingly visible: it moved to the front of the church, and was performed not only in front of other saints, but in front of a watching world. The number of confessions made at any given revival became a measure by which revivalists could gauge their success—and proof to unbelievers that the kingdom of God was advancing, pushing back the kingdom of darkness. Public confessions showed that the holy war against the forces of evil was prospering; revivalists were the recruiters of God's army.

In the last half of the nineteenth century and the first half of the twentieth, leaders accused of sinful behavior could reassure their supporters without resorting to public confession. Presidential candidate Grover Cleveland, accused in the 1880s of taking advantage of a single woman and abandoning the child of the affair, and evangelist Aimee Semple McPherson, suspected of having a fling with her married sound engineer, both managed to recover from their scandals without ever confessing to wrongdoing.

Yet the responses of both showed how the expectation of public confession was already on the rise. Cleveland, while avoiding truly *public* admission of wrong, let it be known that he had in fact confessed to a minister, who in turn spoke on his behalf to the public; McPherson used the language of holy war that accompanied revivalist confession to position herself properly within the cosmic battle between good and evil.

After 1925, revivalist preaching on radio and later on television made the sound and sight of public confession increasingly familiar. This sort of programming, originally shut out from national networks, took an enormous leap forward in 1960 when the FCC changed its restrictions on religious programming; over the following ten years, confession-oriented programming became the most visible, the most aggressive, the most familiar of all religious broadcasts. Simultaneously, a secular (but Protestant-sponsored) form of confession had

developed greater and greater influence: group psychotherapy, rooted in the Emmanuel Movement, encouraged the practice of confession in a gathering of equals. Therapy took to the airwaves, with radio psychologists offering live counseling to patients who confessed their difficulties and inadequacies to a listening audience of hundreds of thousands.

By 1969, when Edward Kennedy came before the bar of public opinion to defend his actions at Chappaquiddick, public confession had grown thoroughly familiar to the American public. Yet Kennedy, faithful to his Catholic upbringing (and oblivious to the necessity of reassuring his public that he was *not* a political aristocrat who would abuse his power), refused to confess.

Kennedy's partial failure—he lost the presidential nomination (permanently, as it turned out) but remained in public life—stands at a transitional point. Confessional programming was moving beyond the radio to the television screen, as dozens of confessional talk shows followed the debut of Phil Donahue's ground-breaking television talk show in 1967. Even more significant was the fusion of the language of holy war with political agendas in the 1970s and 1980s. This rhetoric, merging spiritual and political dangers into one enemy, turned political leaders into figures of theological importance and ministers into politicians. Evangelicals pleaded for national repentance, echoing the calls of the nineteenth-century revivalists. Confession was not merely a way to rebalance the power between leader and follower; it was a tool that placed the confessing sinner on the right side of the holy war.

In this highly polarized climate, politicians (particularly those who, like Jimmy Carter, identified themselves as Christians) were also forced to locate themselves on the battlefield. Carter, asked for the same sort of reassurance that Kennedy's supporters had craved, used confession in an effort to demonstrate that he would not take advantage of presidential power, but his misunderstanding of the symbols and rhetoric of holy war turned his confession into a catastrophe. The erring televangelists of

the 1980s were also pushed into public confession; like Carter, confession offered them an opportunity to reassure their devotees that they were still fighting on the side of divine good. Bakker entirely failed to appreciate this, instead turning on his allies and destroying any chance of forgiveness; Jimmy Swaggart confessed successfully, preserving his ministry until a later refusal to confess reversed his triumph.

Clinton, raised in blue-collar evangelicalism, was able to speak the language of holy war. His admission of sin, which made careful use of evangelical Protestant vocabulary while avoiding any actual admission of legal guilt (or financial misdoing), was intensely reassuring. It showed that, as a leader, he had no intrinsic, inborn superiority, but was simply a sinner among sinners, a man struggling (and sometimes failing) to fight against wrongdoing. It placed him on the right side of a holy war against evil. It granted power to the listeners, by acknowledging their right to judge their leader and allowing them the chance to take part in the cleansing ritual of forgiveness.

In contrast, Bernard Law's Catholic tradition saw private confession as the norm. But when Law refused to admit fault publicly, many American Catholics saw his reticence as both a minimization of the presence of sin—a refusal to recognize the existence of the battlefield between good and evil—and as an intolerable assertion of authority. Furthermore, Law's actions were widely seen as subverting the American legal system in order to victimize the helpless. And Law's resistance to making a public confession, while entirely in line with Catholic practice, denied an increasingly vocal and active Catholic population any role in the administration of their own parishes. Saturated in a culture that saw evangelical-style public confession as normative and the authority between church leaders and their followers as essentially democratic in structure, American Catholics found Law's reluctant apologies troubling, infuriating, and, in the end, entirely inadequate.

Law's failure and Clinton's success show the extent to which evangelicalism had provided a national language for erring

leaders. The warnings of the televangelists were wrong; American politics were *not* more secular than ever. By the beginning of the twenty-first century, erring leaders faced a demand that the voters of 1884 never made: the demand to publicly acknowledge sin and receive God's forgiveness.

The rise of public confession was not due to the power of evangelicalism but to the essential likeness between American democracy and American evangelicalism. They share the resemblance not merely of first cousins, but of full siblings, unable, even when hostile, to separate from each other.