THE DARK BOX

A SECRET HISTORY
of CONFESSION

JOHN CORNWELL

PROFILE BOOKS

This paperback edition published in 2015

First published in Great Britain in 2014 by
PROFILE BOOKS LTD
3A Exmouth House
Pine Street
London EC1R 0JH
www.profilebooks.com

First published in the United States of America by
Basic Books, a Member of the Perseus Books Group

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

Designed by Pauline Brown
Printed and bound in Great Britain by
CPI Group (UK) Ltd, Croydon CR0 4YY

Scripture quotations are from the Holy Bible Revised Standard Version Containing the Old and New Testaments with the Apocrypha/ Deuterocanonical Books: An Ecumenical Edition. New York: Collins, 1973.

A CIP catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library.

ISBN 978 1 78125 109 6
eISBN 978 1 84765 954 5

CONTENTS

PART ONE

A BRIEF HISTORY *of* CONFESSION

One

Early Penitents and Their Penances

> Wash me thoroughly from mine iniquity,
> and cleanse me from my sin!
>
> —Psalm 51

On the day known as Ash Wednesday, many Christians the world over sport a dark smudge on their foreheads in the shape of a cross. They are marking the beginning of the penitential season of Lent with a public display that harks back to the remote origins of the sacrament of penance. That morning they have received on the brow in memory of the crucifixion a sign in ash made from burnt palm leaves and olive oil, to the accompaniment of the words 'Remember that you are dust, and unto dust you will return!'[1] But there is an earlier tradition of marking the head with

ashes that has its origins in Jewish and Christian rituals for the reconciliation of sinners.

The Hebrew prophets and poets dwelt on guilt, individually and collectively. 'My sin', wrote the Psalmist, 'is always before me.' And, 'I eat ashes like bread, and mingle tears with my drink.' Ritualistic contrition had antecedents in the Jewish Day of Atonement, involving a day and night of fasting. The tradition developed over many centuries and was originally a means of making reparation for mistakes and incorrect rituals in temple sacrifices. We read in Jonah how the Ninevites averted God's anger by wearing sackcloth and ashes and engaging in fasting and prayer. In time, the Day of Atonement, practised widely in synagogues in the absence of the Temple (after 70 CE), encouraged reconciliation with those whom one had wronged as well as sorrow for offending God. In the Jewish tradition, while sins against God could only be forgiven by God, sins against one's neighbour had to be forgiven both by that neighbour and by God. Repentance, according to the Sages, brought about acquittal and purity, allowing men and women to come close to God. The central meaning of atonement was this 'at-one-ment'.[2]

In the course of Jesus's ministry, we find him expressing a purer Hebrew prophetic tradition which required a change of heart rather than an external ritual. He said of Mary Magdalene: 'Her sins, which are many, are forgiven, for she loved much.' Critics who question the Scriptural origins of the Catholic sacrament of penance cite several examples—the woman taken in adultery, the prodigal son, the penitent

thief, Peter's forgiveness for his denial of Christ—demonstrating the absence of an external agent, a priest or confessor, serving as mediator. James and John spoke of the need for all Christians to tell each other their sins.[3]

The principal rite of absolution of sins in the early Church was baptism, which was bestowed on adult converts. Baptism washed away the original sin of Adam and Eve. Atonement for sin had been achieved once and for all with Christ's sacrifice on the cross and was now completed for each individual in the waters of baptism. Nor was candidacy for baptism made easy. Catechumens—those preparing for Christian membership—were obliged to submit to long periods of prayer and austerity, and even to call on the services of official exorcists to cast out their demons.

Yet as the primitive Church grew and expanded, and members of the faithful fell by the wayside, rituals of reconciliation emerged as once-in-a-lifetime events. Christians often found themselves under threat and in a minority, fearful for their livelihoods and very lives. Those who committed serious crimes were a threat to the community. Christians were convinced, moreover, that Judgement Day would come sooner rather than later. Sinners stood in imminent danger of eternal damnation. In the early era of the Church, members of the faithful who had been excluded for grave sins were readmitted only after the completion of a series of painful public ceremonies.

The way back was harsh, melodramatic, and communal. Barefoot penitents—garbed in sackcloth, heads shaven,

faces and skulls besmirched with filth—were summoned to approach the altar and the assembly's bishop at the beginning of Lent. After the congregation had chanted lengthy petitions to the saints, the penitents rose to confess their sins out loud: principally adultery, violence, and idolatry. In one ceremony the clergy and the laity cried out '*Indulgentia*' (Mercy), 'Release us from our misery!' 'Help all penitents!' St. Jerome wrote, of a widowed Roman penitent accused of adultery, 'The bishop, the priests, and the people wept with her. Her hair dishevelled, her face pale, her hands dirty, her head covered in ashes, she beat her naked breast and face with which she had seduced her second husband. She revealed to all her wounds, and Rome, in tears, contemplated the scars on her emaciated body.'[4] The readmission of penitents to the assembly, in many cases dependent on the communal decision of the congregation, traditionally took place on Maundy Thursday of Holy Week.

The evolution of ritual was not without problems. There were early rigorist groups who insisted that lapsed Christians should never be allowed re-entry. Casuistic arguments arose, especially over the circumstances of sexual sin—a focus of obsessive anxiety among early Christians. The influential second-century writer Tertullian, a lawyer by profession and a keen disciplinarian by temperament, was convinced that sex even between married couples polluted both body and soul. Women, moreover, constituted a permanent provocation to chastity. He saw them as indeterminate human beings. They were, as he expressed it in

his *De Cultu Feminarum*, the 'Devil's Gateway', a breach in the citadel of the Church through which the secular world would enter to poison the chaste assemblies of male saints. Perpetual virginity in a woman was the highest virtue, in his view; even second marriage after widowhood was for him a kind of adultery. The delight of orgasm, he insisted, was shameful. 'In that final release of pleasure, do we not sense a loss of our very souls?' Tertullian argued that the principal sins—apostasy, idolatry, adultery, and homicide—were unforgivable, setting the scene not only for increasing exclusions from reconciliation, despite contrition, but debates about the extent and limits of adultery. So we find Bishop Cyprian of Carthage in 259 asking whether a consecrated virgin (a woman who had taken a vow of lifetime celibacy), guilty of a sin against chastity, was truly an adulteress, since she was not married. He concluded after much debate that she should suffer the same penalties as an authentic adulterer, as she had committed the sin against her spiritual spouse, Jesus Christ.[5]

On a windswept rock rising sheer out of the Atlantic some eight miles off the coast of Kerry, Ireland, stand the remains of a primitive monastery known as Skellig Michael, believed to have been founded in the sixth century. On this forbidding island, a community of monks lived a life of isolation, prayer, and penance for centuries. In such places, at the far-flung

limits of Christendom, an early form of confession, as it would come to be known, was first practised.

With the invasions of the Visigoths and the Franks beginning in the fifth century, and the resulting breakdown of civil societies, the once-in-a-lifetime exclusions and elaborate reconciliations went into decline. Yet a form of repetitive, private contrition was emerging within monastic communities in Ireland, Scotland, and Wales, conducted by elders, abbots, and abbesses. The practice gradually spread outside the monastic setting as missionary monks from the north travelled south. This was the practice of 'auricular' confession in the making—confession 'into the ear of the confessor'. Hence the idea of sin as requiring the forgiveness of the community gave way to the confession of sins through the private ministrations of a confessor who might be a monk or a nun. A crucial difference between the old reconciliation and the new was the practice of confessing lesser, 'venial' sins as well as the grave, 'mortal' ones. The penances were no less harsh than in the past, but they became more systematic as bishops, abbots, and leading missionaries developed sets of penitential 'tariffs', including sleep deprivation, fasts, exile, and pilgrimages (alone or in groups), for a range of sins. Christian fast days today, the Catholic tradition of not eating meat (but welcoming fish) on Fridays, and the popularity of pilgrimages echo the penitential practices of the second half of the first millennium of Christianity. At St. Patrick's Purgatory Island in Donegal, Ireland, pilgrims to this day practise self-mortifications reminiscent of the penances of the sixth century. They pray all

night in the island's church; the next day, they walk barefoot on beds of rock, praying as they go. They eat only a single meal, dry toast washed down with black tea, in the course of three days and nights.

Manuals of these early tariffs came to be known as the 'penitential books'. Among the most influential was *The Penitential of St. Columbanus*, who founded monastic communities in France, Switzerland, and Italy to become one of the great European missionaries of his age. Writing in about 600, Columbanus emphasised not only the sins of action and omission, and offences against others and the community, but also mental sins. Even if one had only desired 'in thought' to kill, to commit fornication, to steal, to feast in secret and be drunken, or to strike someone, he said, 'let him do penance for the great ones half a year, for the lesser ones forty days on bread and water.' He warned, moreover, 'just as we must beware of mortal and fleshly sins' before approaching the Eucharist, 'so we must refrain, and cleanse ourselves from interior vices and the sicknesses of the ailing soul before the covenant of true peace and the bond of eternal salvation.'[6]

As in the early centuries of the Church, the penitentials focused on sins of the flesh, which merited abstinence from intercourse for the married. In Columbanus's penitential, expiation of the sin of adultery in which a layman had begotten a child by another's wife required 'three years refraining from the more appetizing foods and from his own wife'. If a layman committed fornication 'in a sodomite fashion, that is, has sinned by effeminate intercourse with a male', the penance

was seven years: 'for the three first on bread and water and salt and dry produce of the garden, for the remaining four let him refrain from wine and meat'. The regard for modesty in the teaching of Columbanus was extreme: '. . . if anyone, even while sitting in the bath, has uncovered his knees or arms, without need for washing dirt, let him not wash for six days, that is, let that immodest bather not wash his feet until the following Lord's Day.'[7]

The writer of the *Bigotian Penitential* of the eighth century was preoccupied with masturbation. If a priest by sinful thoughts 'has caused his sperm to flow', he must fast for a week. If he 'touches his member with his hand', he shall do penance for three weeks. 'He who often causes his sperm to flow by passionate thoughts', wrote the author, 'shall do penance for twenty days.' And there is more: 'He whose sperm flows whilst he is sleeping in church, shall do penance for three days. If he stimulates himself, for the first offence twenty days, for the second one, forty; if more often, fasts shall be added.'[8]

Women were to suffer exclusions in certain circumstances. 'During their monthly period women should not enter a church nor receive communion', states the *Bigotian Penitential*. 'He who has intercourse with his wife during her monthly period shall do penance for twenty days.' A pregnant woman, moreover, 'must abstain from her husband for three months before childbirth, and during the period of purgation afterwards: that is, forty days and nights.'[9]

As the penitentials multiplied, so did attention to the role of the confessor. One penitential warns of the crime of

telling tales outside of the confessing relationship. Categories of sins were also developed, drawing not only on the Ten Commandments but also the Book of Leviticus, the Letters of St. Paul, and the wisdom of the individual author of the penitential. The Seven Deadly Sins, those capital sins categorised in the early Christian period as symptomatic of the Fall, were constantly invoked: anger, avarice, sloth, pride, lust, envy, and gluttony. Intentional acts were contrasted with unintentional ones: if the desire to sin was frustrated only by lack of opportunity, it was deemed equivalent to the act itself. Premeditated crimes carried greater penances than those done rashly. For example, a murderer who had planned his crime would be exiled for ten years, whereas one who killed in the heat of the moment suffered exile for six. A sin that had become a habit was punished more severely than a single instance.

The status of the sinner was also considered, based on degrees of responsibility, privilege, and education. A bishop, for example, was deemed to carry more guilt than a priest or layperson committing the same sin. Allowances were made for the sick, the unemployed, and the poor. A rich penitent was allowed to pay a substitute to do his penance for him.

Pilgrimage, an increasingly popular penance, was based on a belief in the power and presence of the relics of saints. The bones of Sts. Peter and Paul attracted the faithful to Rome as the centre of Christendom, although the Eternal City would also vie with Jerusalem. But whereas Muslims are obliged to journey to one destination, Mecca, for the fulfilment of their pilgrimage, Christians from the earliest era had a variety of