

Susan Wise Bauer, **The Art of the Public Grovel: Sexual Sin and Public Confession in America**, Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2008, 352 pp., \$19.67 (hardcover).

Reviewed by
Zohar Kampf
The Hebrew University of Jerusalem

Apologizing, regretting, and confessing in public has become one of the most prominent rhetorical genres of our time. Since the 1990s, a wide range of actors — including states, religious institutions, financial organizations, politicians, and more — have engaged, willingly or not, in these acts of public groveling, expressing contrition for their sins or misdeeds. Hundreds of public manifestations of this symbolic gesture to victims have led scholars from various disciplines to claim that we are living in the *age of apology* (Brooks, 1999; Gibney et al., 2007; Govier & Verwoerd, 2002; to name a few). Several studies have claimed that the expansion of this trend has been led by the Catholic Church. The decision of the Holy See to purify past sins on the threshold of the third millennium ended with 94 apologies by 1998 (Marrus, 2007). Public articulation of apologies by religious institutions possessing great influence on believers around the globe has lent them an ethical aura, making them a model for emulation by national, secular leaders (Recall, for example, Bill Clinton's institutional and historical apologies to Hawaiians in 1993, Ugandans in 1998, and Guatemalans in 1999). Accordingly, the speech act of apology has become an evidence of (Catholic) religious influence on secular cultures.



In line with the growing list of books on the practices of acknowledging responsibility in public, Susan Bauer's original and illuminating work, *The Art of the Public Grovel*, invites the reader on an exploratory journey into the rhetorical genre of Protestant-style confession. Bauer's exploration tracks the Protestant influence on the secular American public culture. Her examination spans centuries, beginning with the fourth century and the birth of Catholic confession, on into the 13th century and the advent of the Protestant version of confession, and ends with televised confessions made by American public figures in the 21st century. Bauer demonstrates how confessions broke forth from the sacred, private confessional room and gradually became public and secular, compelling key figures to repent their sins publicly, following the disclosure of their (mostly) sexual misconduct.

Throughout the book, Bauer interweaves two trajectories of exploration, ending with the current state of the art of confession in the U.S. The first trajectory, titled to "the shift toward public confession," tracks historical developments in the genre of confession, beginning in the fourth century (Chapter 5) with its emergence as a voluntary act of self-revelation taken by sinners. In contrast to popular wisdom at the time — according to which, speaking against oneself was considered an expression of drunkenness or madness — in the Augustine period, confessions became normative and were viewed as a weapon in the battle "between the light and the dark sides of a single self" (p. 84). As such, the Catholic confession was

built on the "radical reflexivity" engaged in by the confessor and performed mainly in order to obtain the forgiveness of God, not humans.

The first step toward public confessions occurred during the Reformation period (Chapter 2). In the centuries following the Fourth Lateran Council's confirmation of private and concealed confessions to a priest in 1215, Protestants developed the ritual of the "conversion narrative," in which public confessions served as proof of one's faith. The presence of others, as witnesses to these rituals, assured that the process of conversion was genuine and sincere. Already in the 18th century, confessions were performed outside of churches, in front of a large audience. They had become a spectacle.

The rise of the electronic media was another milestone in the development of public confessions. The triumph of religious conversion radio programs over religious educational broadcasting is one example of how a strategy to block peripheral groups from accessing mainstream media can boomerang. Airtime on American broadcast media to promote educational religious programs was only allocated to mainstream Protestants and "recognized outstanding" Catholic leaders (p. 60). Yet other groups, such as fundamentalists and Pentecostals (all part of the New Evangelical Alliance, NEA), who viewed confessions on broadcast media as a major weapon in the "holy war," bought airtime on local stations and developed an efficient system for collecting contributions from listeners for this holy mission. When the national broadcast policy of the U.S. changed in 1960, the NEA groups had resources to expand their reach and became the dominating bodies in airing religious programs. Their victory over mainstream groups turned confession into a nationwide practice. This shift toward more confessional-style religious programming engaged more audiences with public acts of groveling and invited them to participate in mediated rituals through prayer, by holding radio and television sets in their own living rooms.

At the outset of the 20th century, following Freud's visit to the U.S. in 1909, the secular confessional style emerged. Therapeutic programs during the 1940s and 1950s, aimed at improving public mental health, exhibited the same patterns as religious programs which aspired to spread the gospel. Confessions became more and more common, not only on religious programs, but also on radio phone-in and television talk shows. From Phil Donohue to Oprah Winfrey, and from Oral Robertson to Jimmy Swaggart, the genre of public confession reached its peak in the 1980s. From this point on, according to Bauer, political and religious leaders could not avoid confessing their sins following allegations of sexual misconduct.

The question that comes to mind following this historical development is why confessions became so fashionable. In neglecting powerful sociological explorations into self-reflexivity in the late-modern era (Giddens, 1991; Illouz, 2003), Bauer fails to provide a full answer to this question. However, she does point out the basic characteristics of Protestant-style confessions that make them so powerful and allow the confessors to remain in their positions of power.

According to Bauer, in order to elicit forgiveness from the public, a sinner must not merely apologize, but also perform a confession appropriately. He must address the right (friendly) public, in the right (decent) location, with exact timing. Missing from this account are the ethos of the confessor and the motivation of the public to forgive, two other basic conditions in the pragmatics of forgiveness (Kampf,

2008). After establishing a favorable environment, a sinner must acknowledge the power of the public. He is compelled to perform a sincere and humble confession, free from excuses and justifications. In doing so, the sinner temporarily relinquishes his power in order to receive it back from his supporters (and not from God, as in the Catholic version). The public is willing to return the power back to the sinner, as long as the confessor 1) is successful in signaling he had no intention to misuse his high status for self-benefit; 2) portray himself as someone ordinary, as like any one of his supporters; and 3) position himself on the right side of the "holy war" versus Satan, dark forces, etc.

Although Bauer's conditions for a felicitous public grovel are convincing, the differentiation she makes between the two rhetorical genres of confessions and apologies seems inadequate. Bauer sees apologies as more vulnerable to opportunism, interpreting them as a mere expression of regret, without any level of acknowledging responsibility. Nevertheless, apologies and confessions share several common features. First, both are vulnerable to misuse, as in the case of non-apologies (Kampf, 2009) and those which only give the appearances of confession (Jim Bakker's *I Was Wrong* biography can serve as an example of a pseudo-confession). Conversely, sincere realization of both apologies and confessions, without any transferences of responsibility, can bring about the same positive and merciful reaction from recipients. Second, an acknowledgment of the violation of norms or behavioral codes is an important feature of any apology (Tavuchis, 1991). As such, confessions, as acknowledgments of wrongdoing, can play a part in the elaborated performance of public apologies and vice versa: Apologies and begging for forgiveness can function as elaborated forms of confessional talk (as in the case of Jimmy Swaggart). Third, like confessions, apologies may be seen as part of the same trend referred to in the literature as "the turn to ethics" (Garber et al., 2000). In line with Bauer's observation that, in the 1980s, confessions became more popular and frequent than ever, several scholars, as mentioned above, have identified this period in time as the emerging point of the "age of apology." Even more so, both apologies and confessions can be seen as evidence of religious influence on secular culture. While Bauer persuasively claims that the Evangelical ritual of public confession became part of American secular culture, it is the Catholic manifestation of apologies that served as a catalyst for the inauguration of the "age of apology." Thus, although there are some differences between the two rhetorical genres, confessions and apologies are related. If made sincerely and humbly, both confessions and apologies possess the same puzzling nature of appeasing volatile emotions by following unchangeable deeds with mere words.

Bauer's second trajectory consists of an analysis of confessions made by key political and religious figures at specific points in the genre's evolution. Bauer demonstrates how the rhetorical characteristics of confessions, and the level of publicity expected by the public at each point in time, are adhered to by leaders in their confessions of sexual or financial sins. The argument is that the level of compliance with the principles of felicitous confession, as defined and expected by the public, determines whether a sin will be forgiven, and as a consequence, whether a leader will keep his political power. Although the examples are convincing, Bauer does not mention prominent works in the field of sex scandals, such as *Political Scandal* (Thompson, 2000), that offer a complementary explanation for why genuine admission of fault may save one's prestigious position. According to Thompson, most of the damage caused to political figures following the disclosure of a sexual transgression occurs due to their initial denial of the embarrassing affair, and not from the act itself. When facts indicate that the denial was false, the figure fails a "credibility test" and loses the public's trust (which is regarded as the most

important commodity in our personalized and mediated political arena). Thus, early confessions of wrongdoing — again, as in the case of Jimmy Swaggart — may reduce the chances for second order transgressions (the denial), leaving the figure to deal only with the ramifications of the sin itself, rather than the lie.

A series of successful and unsuccessful confessions allows Bauer to illustrate the evolution of the rhetorical genre. Grover Cleveland's private confession in 1884 (Chapter 1), which saved him from losing his political power following the disclosure of his extramarital affair and child, functions as a watershed. Following this case, public figures could no longer avoid publicly confessing their sins. The case of Aimee Sample McPherson (Chapter 3), a popular Californian preacher in the 1920s, is another milestone in the "coming out" of confessions. McPherson, who fought against rumors and allegations regarding an affair with one of her workers, did not confess her sin, but was the first to appeal to the public using the radio in its early days. Following McPherson's use of rhetorical devices for image restoration, such as positioning oneself on the right side of the "holy war," confessions left the revival tent and moved into media. Nevertheless, some politicians, such as Ted Kennedy and his explanation following the "Chappaquiddick Incident" (Chapters 4 and 5), did not act in accordance with the changing norms. Kennedy failed to understand "the growing public expectation that confession should be part of the storytelling that surrounded scandal" (p. 83). According to Bauer, Kennedy's misreading of the public led to his failure in realizing his future political ambitions. Jimmy Carter's decision in 1976 to confess that he "committed adultery in [his] heart many times" in *Playboy Magazine* (Chapter 6) demonstrates another failure to understand the conditions of a successful confession. Another resounding failure is that of Jim Bakker (Chapter 7), the preacher who promoted public confession to its peak of popularity in the 1980s, but refused to confess his own sexual sins and instead accused other religious figures of setting him up. This strategy led to Bakker's loss of popularity and ended in his five-year jail sentence. Baker's failure served as a lesson to preacher Jimmy Swaggart, who immediately and willingly confessed in 1988, following the disclosure of his relations with a prostitute (Chapter 8). Bauer treats Swaggart's confession as an ideal model, one adopted 10 years later by Bill Clinton, in the wake of the disclosure of his relationship with Monica Lewinsky (Chapter 9). Although Clinton is regarded as a "serial apologizer" concerning institutional expressions of regret, it took him no less than nine months to confess his sins appropriately and win the support of wide sectors of American society. Chapter 10 is devoted to the inflexibility of the Catholic Church, epitomized in the unwillingness of Cardinal Law to acknowledge fault in appointing pedophiles to their positions as priests. In lieu of conclusion, Bauer (riskily) predicts the future of three public figures based on their decisions to repent (or not) for their sins: Ted Haggard (confessed), Mark Foley (did not confess), and David Vitter (confessed).

In sum, confessions are certainly not wonder drugs, but if made felicitously by sinners — that is, publicly, at the right time, in the right place, and with the use of a self-groveling, Evangelical-style rhetoric — they may result in the public's forgiveness. Overall, Bauer's book is a very enjoyable read, and her exploration of the public act of groveling from both historical and rhetorical perspectives contributes original knowledge to the growing research field of political rhetorical genres. A wide range of communication scholars and students, especially those studying public rhetoric/discourse, political scandals, religious uses of media, and infotainment trends, will find this work of great value in their endeavors to understand more fully this type of public rhetoric and its historical roots.

References

- Brooks, R. L. (1999). "The age of apology." In R. L. Brooks, (Ed.). *When Sorry Isn't Enough: The Controversy Over Apologies and Reparation for Human Injustice*, pp. 3-12. New York: New York University Press.
- Garber, M., Hanssen, B., & Walkowitz, L. R. (2000). *The Turn to Ethics*. New York and London: Routledge.
- Gibney, M., Howard-Hassmann, R., Coicaud, J.-M., & Steiner, N. (Eds.). (2007). *The Age of Apology*. Pennsylvania University Press, Pennsylvania.
- Giddens, A. (1991). *Modernity and self-identity: Self and society in the late modern age*. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press.
- Govier, T., & Verwoerd, W. (2002). The promise and pitfalls of apology. *Journal of Social Philosophy*, 33(1), pp. 67-82.
- Illouz, E. (2003). *Oprah Winfrey and the Glamour of Misery: An Essay on Popular Culture*. New York: Columbia University Press.
- Kampf, Z. (2008). "The Pragmatics of Forgiveness: Judgments of Apologies in the Israeli Political Arena." *Discourse & Society*, 19(5), pp. 577-598.
- Kampf, Z. (2009). Public (non-) apologies: The discourse of minimizing responsibility. *Journal of Pragmatics*. In press. Available online via DOI: 10.1016/j.pragma.2008.11.007
- Marrus, M. R. (2007). "Papal apologies of Pope John Paul II." In Gibney, M., Howard-Hassmann, R., Coicaud, J.-M., & Steiner, N. (Eds.). *The Age of Apology*. Philadelphia, PA: Pennsylvania University Press.
- Tavuchis, N. (1991). *Mea Culpa: A Sociology of Apology and Reconciliation*. Stanford, California: Stanford University Press.
- Thompson, B. J. (2000). *Political Scandal*. Cambridge, UK: Polity Press.