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CONFESSION FROM THE POINT OF VIEW OF THE EXPERIENCE OF THE PEOPLE SEEKING HELP

An Empirical Study about Confessional Practices in Finland and Hungary

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The article presents confession practice from the point of view of the confessants. The practice and experiences of the confessants are presented based on two earlier research studies. The source material of both researches was based on letters written by the confessants themselves with the need of stress relief. As the collection and analysis of the material was conducted with a similar method, it is also possible to compare the findings of the two research studies. Based on letters from Finnish and Hungarian respondents, the authors look at several topics: expectations of the confessants, criteria of experiencing absolution, the relationship between confessant and confessor and the effect of confession on the spiritual life of the confessant.

Keywords: confession, confessional practice, confessor, confessant, absolution, anxiety, sin, guilt, distress

Beichte aus der Perspektive der Erfahrungen Hilfesuchender: Empirische Studie über die Praxis der Beichte bei Finnen und Ungarn: Der Artikel stellt die Praxis der Beichte aus der Sicht der beichtenden Person, des Büßers, vor. Die Beichte und die Erfahrungen der Büßer werden von zwei früheren Studien ausgehend untersucht. Das Quellenmaterial dieser Studien bilden Briefe von Büßern mit dem Bedürfnis nach Stressreduzierung. Da die Materialsammlung und -analyse in beiden Studien auf ähnliche Weise erfolgte, konnten die Ergebnisse miteinander verglichen werden. Auf der Grundlage der Briefe von finnischen und ungarischen Untersuchungsteilnehmern haben die Autoren verschiedene Themen untersucht: Erwartungen der Büßer, Kriterien für das Erleben der Lossprechung, das Verhältnis zwischen Beichtvater und Büßer sowie die Wirkung der Beichte auf das spirituelle Leben des Büßers.

Schlüsselbegriffe: Beichte, Praxis der Beichte, Beichtvater, Büßer, Lossprechung, Angstzustände, Sünde, Schuld, Reue

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1. Introduction

The topic of confession has been studied widely in the fields of systematic theology and canonical justice. In the two thousand years of the Church's history, confession has always been present (although with different priorities and interpretations) as a framework provided by the Church and the given community as a response to the basic human needs of stress relief and liberation from burdens. According to the understanding of the Church, this human need achieves its goal if the process is realised in a transcendental dimension. Despite its special character, confession practice has been marginalised among believers. In Protestant churches, it has practically disappeared and even the Lutheran Church looks at it as a part of our own pastoral tradition or as a method of spreading the gospel which is, alas, forgotten. In the Roman Catholic Church where confession was elevated to the role of a sacrament, confession as a way of relieving stress and laying down one's burdens is practised in a much more lively manner. At the same time, following World War II the Roman Catholic Church has also been speaking of a crisis of the sacrament of confession. The first reactions to this statement were mainly negative. Many scholars insisted that an institution which is based on Holy Scripture and which the Church has preserved for centuries must not suffer a crisis. In 1984, pope John Paul II declared at the end of a Bishops' Synod that the sacrament of penance is in a crisis.¹ Now, after thirty years the statement and its consequences are still relevant.

Although there is extensive literature on the research of confession, those are mainly theoretical papers. One can very rarely see studies which approach the question of confession from the practical point of view, primarily from the confessant's perspective. The present article would like to introduce and compare two empirical research studies which approached the question of confession not from an academic but from a practical point of view. In 1998, Paavo Kettunen published an extensive study on confession in Finland (KETTUNEN 1998). It was based on letters sent in reply to requests published in newspapers calling for personal experiences of confession. Máté JOÓB (2006) defended his PhD thesis at the Evangelical-Lutheran Theological University in Hungary (*A békesség élménye: Az egyéni bűnbánat kvalitatív tartalomelemzése pasztorálpszichológiai szempontból / An Experience of Peace: A Qualitative Content Analysis of Private Confession from the Perspective of Pastoral Psychology*).² This was also based on letters in which Hungarians wrote about their experiences of confession. Although the two research studies were conducted with a few years' time difference and both of them date back to more than 10 years, the questions they stated are still valid.

Confession practice cannot be studied without looking at its circumstances: the church and society in which those churches serve. At the same time confession meets a basic human need in which sense we must not forget its significance for mental health. In the present sample, many participants also said that confession (sharing the burdens) has a stress-relieving effect independent of any theological dimension. If the confes-

¹ On the crisis of penance, see also CSIZMADIA 1999, 188–190.

² An experience of peace. A qualitative content analysis of private confession from the perspective of pastoral psychology (JOÓB 2006).

sant experiences an inclusive and supportive attitude, it further strengthens the cathartic (cleansing) experience. In addition to the stress-relieving effect of sharing, it also underlines taking responsibility which is an important factor relating confession practice to mental health (in addition to maintaining our spiritual life). The empathetic (merciful) attitude of the confessor can further strengthen the self-appreciation of the confessant.

2. Confessional practices in different denominations

Before presenting the findings of the two research studies, we briefly present the confession practice in different communities as codified in church prescriptions.

2.1. In the Roman Catholic Church

Confession practice in the Roman Catholic Church is part of the liturgical renewal following the Second Vatican Council. *Ordo Paenitentiae* (The Rite of Penance) was published on 2 December 1973 and it is still the basis of the confession practice in the Roman Catholic Church. Based on it, the compulsory act of private confession for believers is construed as follows: the confessor receives the confessant and calls upon him/her to trust in God. He freely quotes the Word of God or reads passages according to the situation. The confessant confesses his/her sins, shows contrition and receives absolution from the confessor after the necessary advice, personal address and answers. The confessant gives thanks to God for his grace and takes leave (SÓLYMOS 1975, 20). *Ordo Paenitentiae* does not only publish the order of private confession but also describes its elements in detail. A short summary of this could help a better understanding of the confession practice itself.

The first part of the sacrament of penance is *contrition*. Contrition also includes the intention of sinning no more (HORVÁTH & TOMKA 2002, 219). Since the Middle Ages, the teaching of the Roman Catholic Church has used the distinct concept of *contritio* in which the believer arrives at penance from a heartfelt love towards God. Contrition is actually already a way to salvation – even in the case of grave sins. The tension between the teaching of the Church and the outcome of contrition is solved as follows:

Heartfelt contrition must include the intention that we will do whatever our God requests. This way we are also ready for *sacramental confession*. We definitely need contrition if having committed a grave sin and having gotten into deadly danger but with no possibility to confess. Contrition together with a wish to confess purifies our soul.

(HORVÁTH & TOMKA 2002, 222, our trans.)³

³ Original text: ‘A tökéletes bánatnak magában kell foglalnia azt a szándékot is, hogy mindent megteszünk, amit Isten kíván tőlünk. Így készek vagyunk a *szentségi kien-gesztelődésre, a gyónásra* is. Tökéletes bánatra feltétlenül szükségünk van akkor, ha súlyos bűnt követtünk el, és halálveszélybe kerültünk, gyónásra pedig nincs módunk. A tökéletes bánat a gyónás szándékával egybekötve megtisztítja lelkünket.’

In addition to contrition, there is the concept of the less perfect notion of *attritio* in which the believer repents his/her sins for fear of a righteous punishment. This is not enough to achieve an absolution of grave sins but it prepares the believer to ask for absolution through the sacrament of penance (*Catechism of the Catholic Church* 2000, 364–65 = No. 1453). In the case of less grave sins, it is enough to seek God's absolution through repentant deeds. Repentant deeds are, for example, fasting, prayer and the deeds of Christian love. In the case of grave sins, sacramental confession is necessary. In the case of attrition, one should make confession at once, whereas in the case of contrition the sacrament can be taken later on. However, such a delay should not prevent the believer from fulfilling the order according to which the sacrament of penance should be taken at least once a year (989).

The second part of the sacrament of penance is *confession*. Confession is necessary because the believer admits his/her sinfulness before God and the Church and through that receives sacramental forgiveness. Confession must be uttered to a priest who is given a legal mandate to receive confession. In case of a deadly danger, every priest has this capacity.

The third part of the sacrament of penance is the *act of penance* (satisfaction). *Ordo Paenitentiae* teaches that true conversion can only be fulfilled through acts of penance, amendment of conduct and reparation of injury. Satisfaction is a good deed, specified by the priest, which must be completed so that the injury caused by the sin can be remedied and the penitent could be strengthened on the way of Christ (HORVÁTH & TOMKA 2002, 237).

The last part of the sacrament of penance is *absolution*. Although all priests have received a mandate to grant pardon to sinners within the sacrament of holy orders, for a valid absolution, however, they also need a mandate to give the sacrament of penance. This is usually granted after an examination by the ordinates. In deadly danger, absolution may nonetheless be spoken without such a mandate (245).

2.2. In the Lutheran Church

In the Lutheran Church, there is no unified and compulsory teaching on the practice of private confession. Although LUTHER does present a confessional order in his *Small Catechism*, 'How plain people are to be taught to confess', but he also states that 'this is intended simply as an ordinary form of confession for plain people' (1959, 351).

Several national churches publish some guidelines and, in some cases, also forms of confession in their hymn books used today. Within the hymn book of the Evangelical-Lutheran Church in Hungary, there is a special part on confession among other prayers (*Evangélikus énekeskönyv* 1998, 693–702). Although this section does not include a liturgy of confession, it still gives a few guidelines for the believers. For

the question ‘How many types of confession are there?’ (our trans.),⁴ the fourth answer says: ‘Private confession to a pastor’ (694, our trans.).⁵ The text goes on: ‘Jesus Christ mandated his Church, the official servants of the Word to give absolution for sins in His name’ (701, our trans.).⁶ In addition to the above – i.e. that the Lord of the Church has given the task of absolution to the official servants of the Word – there are no more practical guidelines for practising private confession. Therefore it is very important how a pastor teaches and offers this form of conciliation to the members of his/her congregation.⁷

In the Lutheran practice, confession events are often connected to lengthy pastoral discussions. It is not typical for a congregation member to ask for a few minutes’ confession event from the pastor. Usually there is first a pastoral discussion in a free form after which – on request from the confessant or suggested by the pastor – the event can be transformed into a confession and an absolution. The believer seeking help has a decisive role in making this change – both form- and contentwise.

2.3. In the Orthodox tradition

Orthodox Christians are suggested to practise regular confession in order to arrange the sins conducted since the last Communion. Prerequisites of absolution include: intensive examination of one’s conscience; reconciliation with those one has hurt; penitence and intention for amendment; and confession in the face of Jesus Christ, witnessed by the priest. Up until the 14th century, lay monks were mandated to receive confessions. From then on, only priests, monastic priests, and bishops have had this mandate. In the Orthodox practice, confession is often connected to a lengthy pastoral discussion. Penitences have an important function but they have a healing function rather than a satisfactory one, i.e. they are supposed to lead the penitent back to Christ (OHME 2001, 77–80).

2.4. In the Reformed Church

Hungarian Reformed literature on pastoral care is not very elaborate when speaking about the forms and practice of private confession.⁸ On the other hand, it analyses in

⁴ Original text: ‘Hányféle gyónás van?’

⁵ Original text: ‘A magángyónás, a lelkipásztor előtt négyszemközt.’

⁶ Original text: ‘Jézus Krisztus az ő egyházának, az ige hivatalos szolgálóinak adta azt a hatalmat, hogy feloldozást adjanak: az Ő nevében bűnöket bocsássanak.’

⁷ The official Confirmation Catechism of the church may give a suitable starting point. Although it does not include guidelines for the practical fulfilling of private confession, it does mention the theoretical background (*Konfirmációi káté* 2004, 38–41).

⁸ Géza BOROSS does not even mention the possibility of private confession in his ‘Pastoral Theology’ (1997, 98–102). Csaba FEKETE comments on today’s situation as follows: ‘In the life and practice of the Protestant churches after the Reformation, the abolition of confession to the ear and the loss of importance of the

detail a type of pastoral dialogue which – taken its direction and goal – can well be understood as a form of private confession.

In his work *Lelkigondozástan* (Pastoral Care), Tivadar RÓZSAI (1981) defines the elements of private confession in the classical way: The role of the Word in confession is 1. *satisfactio*, i.e. satisfaction through the redeeming sacrifice of Christ which has no conditions; 2. *absolutio*, which means the announcing of free grace, and 3. *confessio*, which means confession and creed at the same time (35). Reversing the order of *absolutio* and *confessio* this way is highly untypical. However, Rózsai did not want to define a given form for pastoral workers. He was speaking of the role of the Word in private confession.

A book published by the Hungarian Reformed Church in 1949 (*Van-e evangéliumi gyónás?*) had certainly had an effect on the fact that the formal requirements of private confession have remained in the background. In this short work, Eduard THURNEYSEN defines confession and absolution as an activity of the congregation and mentions two possible forms:

1. Based on James 5:16, confession of sins and absolution among the members of the congregation. Thurneysen underlines that in confession, we need Christian brethren who can help us explore our sins.⁹
2. The other form of confession and absolution is the common confession and absolution at the service (11–13).

Of course Thurneysen does not exclude the possibility that the Christian ‘brethren’ of the confessant could be the pastor of the congregation. But at the same time he takes listening to confession and preaching the gospel as a general task.

2.5. In the Baptist Church

In the Baptist Church, there are no teachings or regulations concerning the practice of private confession so we can only speak about general guidelines (HYDE 1984, 48–49).¹⁰ In the liturgy of a Baptist service, confession and absolution are included before receiving Communion. Confession happens through silent prayer which is followed by general absolution. Before the Communion service, congregation members are asked to acknowledge their sins. This often happens in the form of a prayer confessing sins in the face of God. Confession and absolution among the congrega-

common confession has created an unfilled vacuum both in the divine service and in the spiritual life of the congregation’ (2001, 61, our trans.). Original text: ‘A protestáns egyházak életében és gyakorlatában a reformáció után, a fülbeigónás megszűnésével és a közgyónat elhomályosodásával, majd elhanyagolásával betöltetlen úr keletkezett az istentiszteleti rendtartásban és a gyülekezet lelki életében.’

⁹ In contrast with Thurneysen, János PÁSZTOR has a different position: ‘The servants of the Lord are mandated to preach the word of absolution’ (1985, 103, our trans.). Original text: ‘A bűnbocsánat hirdetésére az Úr szolgáit hatalmazza fel.’

¹⁰ The majority of the information presented here originates from a discussion with Zoltán Nemeshegyi, teacher of the Department of Practical Theology at the Baptist Theological Academy.

tion members is also a well-known and practised form in Baptist communities. In family-like communities with a limited number of members, this practice seems to be preferred to the case when the confessants ask a third person (the pastor) to be of assistance in the acknowledgement of their sins. In Baptist confession practice, content elements are much more important than the form itself.

3. Empirical research on confession

A great part of research on private confession deals with the history and practice of private confession in the different Christian communities. Now we would like to briefly refer to a few empirical studies on the practice of private confession completed in the last century in Western Europe. The first one is the research done by Georg WUNDERLE (1921). Wunderle looked at the Roman Catholic sacramental practice from a psychological point of view. He used a questionnaire through which he gained direct information from the believers practising the sacramental and indirect information from professors and pastors giving absolution on the confession practice of the given community. This study focused on exploring the internal needs of the believers.

In his doctoral thesis published in 1946, Erik BERGGREN discussed the psychology of private confession. He chose texts in which authors from different Christian communities wrote about the practice of private confession. Berggren came to the conclusion that independently of the variation in the teaching of different churches, general psychological processes can be detected in the confessants during the confession event. In his opinion, the confessant is primarily characterised by a breach of psychological harmony – although less so than in the case of neurotic patients. Namely, when someone confesses a given activity or lifestyle as sin, he/she realises at the same time that his/her will is instable and the personality needs to achieve internal unity. The striving towards a confession event is at the same time a sign of need for internal unity and peace. As the psychotherapeutic methods also aim to help the person achieve psychological harmony, Berggren compared those processes to the Christian confession practice.

The next important empirical research was conducted at the end of the 1970s. Konrad BAUMGARTNER (1978) collected his material for two and a half years. A thousand questionnaires were distributed to German Catholics in cities and in the countryside to explore their experiences connected to the sacrament of penance. Baumgartner concluded that the decrease in practising the sacrament of penance is due not only to the persons who do not come to confession anymore. Neither can secularisation be blamed as the main reason behind the scarcity of confessions. The reasons can be better explored if we let the believers themselves tell their experiences of the confession practice. Baumgartner also indicates that young people should be introduced to confession practice only when they are already well-developed in faith. Many unpleasant childhood experiences could be avoided if young people

would start to practise the sacrament of penance at the right age with better focus on individual abilities. Baumgartner also concludes from the feedback from the informants that in theological education, greater emphasis should be laid on pastoral psychology and pedagogy.

In 1996, a research study on a given age group was published by Ursula SILBER. She looked at the confession experiences of women between the age of 30–45. The study showed that the members of this age group are the most likely to turn away from confession practice. It can have grave consequences as this age group is responsible for the raising of the next generation. According to Silber, it is hard to think of parents who do not practise the sacrament of penance themselves but would be able to lead their children and give them a good example of how to do so. This study also speaks about how this age group tries to eliminate the feeling of guilt without practising the sacrament of penance. Silber also concludes that childhood environment and experiences of confession then have a strong effect on one's confession practice in adulthood. Communication (or more precisely the lack of communication) in family and congregation is also a decisive factor in how a person is able to handle his/her guilt and frustration. She also has some important findings concerning the relationship between confessant and confessor. In her opinion, it is a problem for the majority of women between the age of 30–45 to confess their sins to a man. Thus confessants have strongly ambivalent feelings towards the persons speaking the absolution. The study also shows that the confessants have very high expectations towards the persons speaking the absolution and that these persons often fall short of those expectations.

We do not know of any research done in Hungary except for the study presented here that would focus on the practice of private confession especially from the point of view of the persons seeking help and practising the sacrament. The Jesuit periodical *Távlatok* (Perspectives), in its Christmas issue in 1997 published an article 'Kérdések a gyóntatással kapcsolatban' (Questions about confession) after which many readers sent their comments to the editors. The reflections were published in the next issue (1998, 65–70). Here the writings of three priests are complemented with opinions from several lay authors. The collection gives a certain overview of how Roman Catholic believers understand the sacrament of penance. However, the texts are not followed by any comment or analysis from the editors.

4. Research topics

Both researchers aimed at exploring confessional practices on the basis of personal experiences. The motive for research on confession was to look at it from a qualitative perspective. Both research studies had a similar goal, although there were a few formal discrepancies. The Finnish research focused on six subtopics:

1. What kind of confessional practices are there in Finland?
2. How do people choose a confessor and what kind of expectations do they have

- towards them? How did the confessors perform and how have the confessants perceived their actions?
3. What is the distress expressed in confession and what is the confessed sin and guilt?
 4. How did the confession help the confessants?
 5. What kind of view of God and spiritual life is conveyed through confession?
 6. What are the confessants' experiences of themselves during confession?

(KETTUNEN 1998, 72)

The Hungarian study focused on the following questions: For what and in what way did the penitent obtain help during confession? How did they perceive the help they got? How did it influence their spiritual life (JOÓB 2006, 8, 19–20)? The Hungarian study investigated the internal and external motives of the person seeking help (the penitent), problems during preparation for confession, expectations towards the person giving the absolution, factors influencing the liberating experience of confession, reasons for the lack of a liberating experience, connections between confession and spiritual life and connections between confession and spiritual direction (JOÓB 2006, 21).

5. Collection of the material and method

Both sets of research material were collected by requests published in newspapers. Kettunen published his invitation in at least 32 newspapers. Some of the papers were Church-related, and the others were daily newspapers and magazines (KETTUNEN 1998, 72, 78–79). Joób published his request in seven Church-related newspapers. In Finland, 201 letters were received, in Hungary, 117. Due to differences in the ecclesiastic and social context, the collecting of the material was conducted in the two countries in different ways. In Hungary, the requests were only published in Church media and those represented a wider variety of communities than in Finland. In Finland, the requests also appeared in a number of non-denominational newspapers but the pool of respondents came from a narrower sample of creeds. Based on the material, it was apparent that the letters would mirror experiences from a variety of confessional groups.

Both researchers used the method of qualitative content analysis which was already a well-established research method in practical theology in Finland while it was still quite new in theological studies in Hungary. Therefore, Máté JOÓB published a separate article introducing the method (2003, 310–12). Both researchers chose a pastoral psychological approach which meant that the letters of confession were analysed both from a theological and a psychological point of view. This was very much needed as both confession studies focused on the personal experiences of the confessants.

6. Participants

In both countries, the majority of the respondents were women. In Finland, the proportion of women (79%) was even higher than in Hungary (68%). Consequently, the proportion of Finnish men (17%) was smaller compared to the proportion of Hungarian men (30%) (KETTUNEN 1998, 100–01; JOÓB 2006, 28) (see *Figure 1*). In both sets of research material, there were a few letters from which the gender of the author could not be deduced. The gender ratio of the authors was less balanced in Finland than in Hungary. However, the ratio of women and men among the respondents is not an indicator of the proportion of both genders taking part in confession. A German research from the 1970s concerning the experiences of confession shows a similar majority of women (BAUMGARTNER 1978, 15–18). In spite of this, there is no differentiation between the genders in statistics on confessants.¹¹ There is a difference between going to confession and writing about it. It is general knowledge that women are usually more communicative about discussing their inner experiences, regardless of the positive or negative nature of the experience (ATKINSON 1995, 348; GORDON & BURCH 2001, 17).

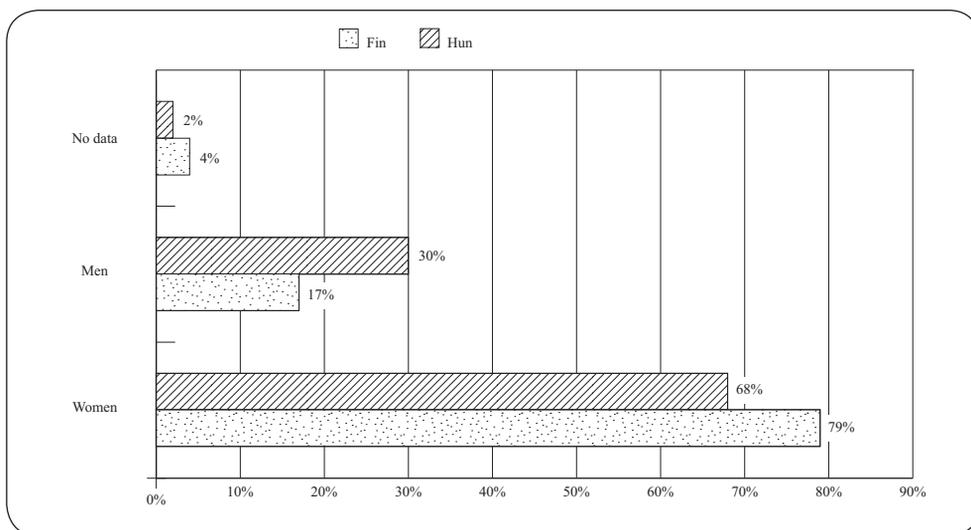


Figure 1
Gender of the respondents

¹¹ In Hungary mass and prayer are taken as the most important factors of personal and community religious life. Personal confession is rarely mentioned in Church statistics (TOMKA 2001, 86–87).

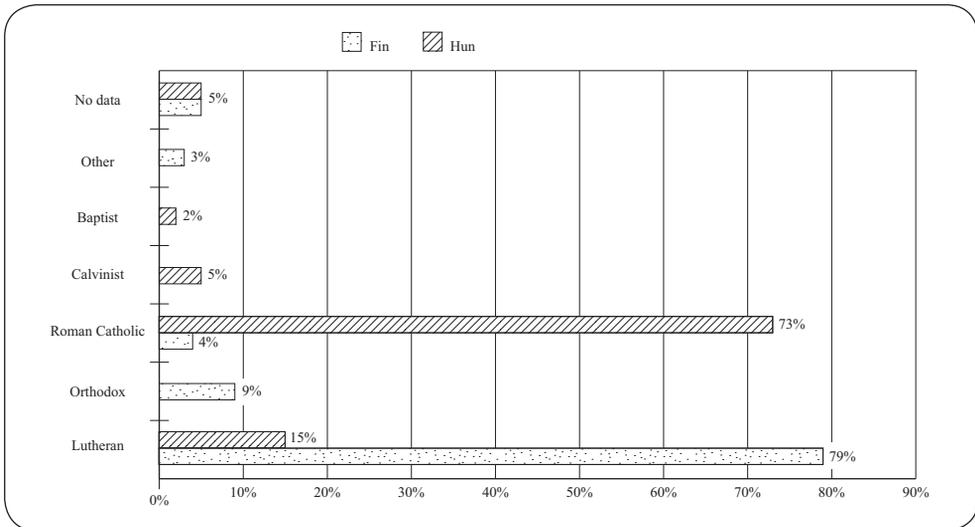


Figure 2
Religious background

All in all, it is surprising how many Finnish and Hungarian respondents were ready to write about their experiences of confession. Even more so since many people consider confession such a personal, delicate and holy matter that they would not want to share it with anybody else. Confession has been discussed very little in any Church tradition because of the sensitivity of the issue. A Swedish study from the 1940s concerning the psychology of confession claims that it is more difficult to collect material concerning the confession from Catholic than from Protestant confessants. It is due to the fact that secrecy binds not only priests but also confessants (BERGGREN 1946, 1–4).

As for the background of respondents in each country, the ratio of Lutherans and Roman Catholics is reciprocal in Finland and Hungary. In addition to this, there were no Calvinist respondents in Finland and respectively no Orthodox respondents in Hungary (see Figure 2). The importance of confession in the Orthodox and Roman Catholic Churches is confirmed by the fact that members of these Churches responded in a much higher number than the proportion of the members of these churches in Finland would have indicated. The proportion of Lutheran respondents was smaller than it would have been expected from the size of their church in Finland.¹² In Hungary, a slightly similar phenomenon was observed. The proportion

¹² At the time of publishing the research, about 1% of Finnish people belonged to the Orthodox Church, while they represented 10% of the respondents. The Roman Catholic Church has only a 0.1% ratio in Finland, however, 4% of the respondents were Catholic (KETTUNEN 1998, 104).

of Catholic respondents (73%) was clearly higher than their representation in the whole population (56%). In Hungary, there was a much higher amount of Lutherans (15%) among the respondents than it was expected in view of their presence in the Hungarian society (3%). This phenomenon was not observed in Finland. On the contrary, there were much fewer Calvinist respondents (5%) than their proportion in Hungary on the whole (16%) would have suggested.¹³

The high proportion of Catholic respondents in the Hungarian study refers to the majority role of that church in Hungary and especially to the importance of confession in it. Respectively, the over-representation of Lutherans is probably due to the fact that the request was published twice in their national newspaper (*Evangelikus Élet*).¹⁴

Comparing additional background information of the respondents is more problematical as the principles concerning the collection of the material were slightly different. However, a few conclusions can still be drawn. A majority of the respondents in both countries came from cities and especially metropolitan areas. The average Hungarian respondents were slightly older than those in Finland. In Hungary, more than 47% of the respondents were over 61 years old, whereas in Finland only 24% of them were over 64 years old. There were hardly any respondents under the age of 20 in both countries. 39% of Hungarian respondents were aged 21–60, while in Finland the so-called ‘active age group’ (25–64) formed the majority of respondents (55% in all).¹⁵

7. Results

7.1. Different confessional practices

Both researchers studied the practice of confession more than the theoretical views people hold about it. The principled conception of confession may be in conflict with the practice of confession. The practice of confession that most influences the confessant’s life is more important. In the analysis of confessional practice, researchers examined the methods of confession and its function, meaning and aftermath for the letter writers. It was not always easy to draw a line between different confessional practices as certain forms could be categorised in several ways. For example, regular confessional practice could refer to pastoral confession that was realised at the altar, by mail or by phone. Categorisation was based on the persons’ own views of their confessions (KETTUNEN 1998, 109–10). As the source material and the ecclesiastic background are different in the two countries, a standard categorisation could not

¹³ The representation of different creeds in Hungary is based on the 2001 census which was the most recent at the time JOÓB published his research (2006, 31). Proportions given for church membership refer to the whole population of the country while proportions of the respondents refer to the number of respondents.

¹⁴ 3 March 2002 and 14 July 2002.

¹⁵ For the details, see KETTUNEN 1998, 100–03; JOÓB 2006, 30.

be applied. The Finnish study focused on different practices of confession and their characteristics and efficiency (110–87). The Hungarian source material was grouped in line with the internal and external motivations of the confessants, i.e. the grouping was done according to the reasons why they wanted to confess (JOÓB 2006, 70–110). The Finnish study explored nine forms of confession, namely (in the order of their frequency) partaking in a regular confessional practice (31%), one-off confession (24%), pastoral confession (17%), transitional confession (11%), confession by phone (4%), confession by mail (4%), general confession and communion as a form of confession (4%), sacramental and liturgical confession plus confession at the altar (3%) and direct confession to God (2%) (KETTUNEN 1998, 111).¹⁶ The internal motives for Hungarian respondents were liberation from burdens, partaking in a regular confessional practice and confession based on conscience. The main external motive was a duty to confess imposed by a certain church. Many respondents mentioned several coexisting reasons (JOÓB 2006, 71–73).

In both studies, the largest group was that which took part in a regular confessional practice. 77 Hungarian and 71 Finnish respondents mentioned this form of confession, i.e. a much larger proportion of Hungarians (66%) belonged to this category compared to the Finnish proportion (36%). 40 Hungarian respondents (34% of all) did not give any information on their confessional practice or they had only occasional experiences of confession. 53 Finnish respondents (27% of all) mentioned one-off confession. More than half of these respondents had no revival movement background or it was not mentioned. This indicates that one-off confession is more characteristic of Lutherans not belonging to a revival movement. A positive feature of one-off confession may be that it is the first opportunity to verbalise a certain problem. The problematic side is that the confessant has magical expectations concerning the confession event and the confessant hopes to arrive at a quick solution to his/her problems (KETTUNEN 1998, 111, 121, 135, 137, 139–40; JOÓB 2006, 80–81).¹⁷

Lutheran confessional practice in Finland and Hungary differs in many ways from the Catholic way as there are no general, compulsory rules in the Lutheran Church. The absence of formal requirements might also indicate that confession is still searching for its place in the pastoral care of the Church. On the other hand, it is possible that confessional practices are defined by their freedom. Still, it is noticeable that a few Lutheran Churches in Western Europe do offer a set framework for confession, in addition to confession in free form.¹⁸ The varied practice within

¹⁶ The proportions given above do not refer to the number of letters but to the different practices as one author may have mentioned several practices. The values are, therefore, only approximative.

¹⁷ Please note that the quantitative comparison between different confessional practices is only approximative. This is most obvious when comparing one-off confession and living in a regular confessional practice. It is quite easy to sort out from the source material those persons who have only used confession once in their life. On the other hand, it is difficult to represent statistically those who confess regularly, as they are not oriented towards the quantity but rather towards a lifestyle. Thus KETTUNEN's (1998, 111, *Figure 6*) estimations about the proportions of different confessional practices are also only approximative.

¹⁸ Cf. *Kirkollisten toimitusten kirja* (1984, 42–44); *Den svenska psalmboken* (1986, 22–23); *Evangelisches Gesangbuch* (1995, 1511–17).

the Finnish and Hungarian Lutheran Churches clearly shows how formal freedom gives an opportunity for both to fulfill the function of confession and to respond to the individual needs of the confessant/penitent. If we understand confession through its function (i.e. helping people to be relieved from their burdens), it can be stated that since people practise formal confession less frequently, the function of confession is actually more often realised in other forms. The liberty of form also backs up this process along with the new methods of pastoral care, which help people to be relieved of their guilt. Nowadays, confession happens more often in the framework of a pastoral conversation. This, of course, applies to Lutheran practice only, as in the Catholic Church confession is a sacrament of which absolution is an integral part (KETTUNEN 2002, 25).

7.2. The confessor and the confessional relationship

Kettunen studied the process of finding a confessor, the method of choosing him/her and the reasons for changing this person after a time. Research was done on the expectations of the confessants related to the confessor's person and on experiences about different kinds of confessors. The aim was to have an overview of the expectations and disappointments related to the person receiving confession (KETTUNEN 1998, 189–259). The expectations concerning the confessor were split into five categories in the Finnish research. These were:

1. pastoral expectations,
2. expectations concerning spiritual life,
3. expectations concerning priesthood,
4. expectations concerning the confessor as an advisor and counsellor,
5. expectations concerning the gender of the confessor.

These expectations were not exclusive; the same confessant could simultaneously expect a pastoral attitude, a belief in God and a given gender from the priest receiving his/her confession (203–04). Joób also scrutinised the different expectations and reasons for changing one's confessor. The reasons were divided into three categories.

1. There were external reasons for change: for example, because the priest was moved to another town. This was a general practice during the Socialist era when the system tried to prevent the formation of close relationships between the priests and the members of the congregation. Many respondents mentioned that this made it difficult for them to establish a proper confessional relationship. They felt it was problematic that confession was compulsory for the Catholics but at the same time the Church made it difficult to fulfil this duty.
2. Another reason for change was disappointment in the confessional situation or the behaviour of the confessor.

3. Some of the respondents said they wanted to change their confessor because they strived to develop in their spiritual life. For them, spiritual direction and confession were very close concepts (JOÓB 2006, 142–63).

Interestingly, there appeared to be no expectations concerning the priesthood or the gender of the confessor in the Hungarian study. Of course, in the Catholic Church there is no such flexibility in choosing a confessor as there is in the Lutheran Church. For Catholics, the confessor can only be an ordained priest who is naturally a man.

The overwhelming majority of both Finnish (61%) and Hungarian respondents rated the pastoral character of the confessor as the most important expectation. The Finnish respondents mentioned trustworthiness, the ability to listen and to understand, self-understanding, secrecy, therapeutic skills, an unhurried attitude and a warm, empathic and accepting nature (KETTUNEN 1998, 203; JOÓB 2006, 152–58). In Hungary, it was often mentioned that the personality of the confessor played a central role in the formation of a liberating experience (JOÓB 2006, 142). They linked this with the expectations towards the confessor. Joób showed that these expectations are very much like the techniques and tools which appeared in Carl R. Rogers's theory concerning the relationship between a psychotherapist and his/her client (FABER & SCHOOT 2002, 38–51; PURHONEN 1988, 53–70).¹⁹ When looking at the role of the confessor and the confessional relationship, two factors emerged strongly from the Finnish material. In most cases, the primary factor in the experience of being helped was the confessional relationship that developed between the confessant and the confessor. The experience of being relieved was realised within the framework of this relationship. If a relationship cannot be formed, it is unlikely that the person will have a relieving experience (KETTUNEN 1998, 255).

According to JOÓB, it became apparent that expectations concerning religious life and the behaviour of the listener had a major role when defining the confessional relationship (2006, 145–48). According to the material (and partly against the findings of Kettunen), personal characteristics also have an important role in the sacramental confession. The way the confessor realises his/her vocation has a central role in the confessional relationship and the experience of being helped. Expectations concerning the religious life of the priest (the priest has to be a strict believer, love God with all his might, give himself to God, be an authentic believer) show that the person giving absolution has to be a so-called middleman before all. He has to be in contact with the person to whom he mediates absolution and, at the same time, with the source of absolution (145). The expectations concerning behaviour show that the helper has to act as an example for the whole community. For the penitent, there is a surprisingly strong relationship between the helping role, pastoral task and spiritual life of the priest, although expectations concerning religious life and behaviour also mirror the personal goals of the believer ('that is how I would like to live after absolution').

In the Finnish study, expectations concerning the religious life of the confessor

¹⁹ To read more about the importance of the healing relationship, see ROGERS 2003, 73–96.

either appeared alongside with the pastoral expectations or they did not have any connection with them. For the confessant, they also meant forming a bond of trust and a relationship with the person receiving confession. They also expressed the confessant's ideals about Christian life. The confessor should 'be a good Christian', 'know the Bible' or 'show unconditional love'. As a whole, the expectations summarised the conception that the person should be 'a person believing in God'. However, there was great variation regarding what this meant for each letter's author. For some of them, faith meant a similar creed to what they held themselves. For others, it was connected to priesthood and the professional secrecy of the priest. There were also those for whom the position in a Church did not have primary importance. All in all, expectations concerning spiritual life showed that confession is not only a human interaction system but it is defined by our relationship with God. Without that, there is no sense in confession at all. It is meaningless to confess a sin which separates the person from God if the relationship with God is not important to the confessor. The concept that spiritual expectations are often combined with human relationship skills is also worth noting. When describing the person of the confessor, spiritual reasons were not enough. A professional attitude (professional secrecy of the priest, for example) was taken to be especially important because of the 'wretched human nature' (KETTUNEN 1998, 211–12).

7.3. Anxiety in confession and the expectation of absolution

The request published in Finnish newspapers asked people to write about the reasons why and topics on which they wanted to confess. Most respondents did not only write about the actual sins and guilt but about general anxiety they wanted to be relieved of by confession. Often sin or guilt was not even mentioned but rather 'sinfulness, which was the driving force to confess'. This might also be due to the fact that the confessant did not want to repeat the things uttered at the confession event. Some of the respondents said they did not want to tell about something that had already been forgiven because that would have decreased the value of forgiveness. On the other hand, the topic of the confession could not be clearly categorised as a sin or reason for guilt. On the basis of the Finnish study, sinfulness and distress can be expressed in at least three ways.

1. There is the confession of actual sins and the reception of absolution.
2. One can enter confession without having any clear sins or guilt to confess. The reason may be a 'generally bad and uneasy feeling for all that has been said and done'.
3. The confession can be linked to the care of religious life.

The anxiety and distress that unfolds in confession (similarly with the multiplicity of confessional practices) shows that confession is nowadays used in a much wider sense in Finland than the traditional definition would indicate. Confession does not only mean a formal confession of sins and guilt and the reception of absolu-

tion for that. The different forms of distress and response to these distresses are also strongly present (KETTUNEN 1998, 261–62).

Although Hungarian confessants did not mention actual sins or topics which they confessed, they used very colourful expressions when they described their expectations related to the confessional situation (JOÓB 2006, 72). It emerged that believers do not always seek confession events because of their sins and needs for absolution. It seems that the primary goal of confessional situations is to give an opportunity to the penitent to be relieved of the burden of sins and return to a harmonic relationship with their Creator, the liberating God. From the penitents' point of view, the basis of confession was a need to be free of a chaotic situation, a sin or something that disturbed their conscience. According to the material, the search for a confessional relationship also meant a search for pastoral care or spiritual direction (232–35).²⁰

According to the findings of the Finnish and partly of the Hungarian results, confession is a framework within which one can face many kinds of distress. The confessor's and the confessant's conceptions concerning the nature of confession often differ from each other, even in the same confessional situation. This, of course, makes it more difficult to receive help. Some people seek relief from uneasiness, some from anxiety, and others from problems in human relationships or simply from loneliness. Some people confess because of a sin or guilt experienced in front of God, while others confess because of alcoholism. For some people there is an actual deed behind the confession, others seek general advice and guidance for their life. This multiplicity is not always clear for the confessors. Often they have a traditional conception of confession and absolution, which may differ very much from the confessants' conceptions. In this case, the latter are less likely to receive the experience of being helped (KETTUNEN 1998, 371–72; JOÓB 2006, 73–79). In the Finnish study, confession proved also to be a channel through which people seek quick help, relief and change in their life. There is a danger that it becomes a magical and mechanical tool for transferring problems instead of solving them. This kind of approach to confession expresses a postmodern attitude which stands for a short-term, quick and project-like life. This attitude may prove to be problematic when the difficulties have accumulated during many decades. Such problems cannot be relieved easily by a few words instead of a long working process. Confession used as *fast food* pastoral care makes it a mechanical tool and is very close to an *ex opere operato* way of thinking. God might become *Deus ex machina*, taking all bad feelings away in a magical way. According to the Finnish study, the most difficult point in facing the distress (expressed in confession) is that a very similar helping model (absolution) is practised in very different contexts of guilt and anxiety. Thus, the real function of confession (forgiveness and liberation) cannot be realised. It does not reach those

²⁰ In the theology and church practice of different times, there have been many attitudes to confession: whether it should be spiritual counselling or should lead to that, or whether the spiritual counsellor and the confessor should be the same person or not. For a detailed description, see THORNTON 1990, 1210; JONES 1990, 1213–15; KETTUNEN 1998, 401–03.

layers of human personality where pain and distress are hidden. It is only ‘preaching’ mental knowledge which does not touch the emotional spheres (KETTUNEN 1998, 372, 375–76, 379).²¹

7.4. The relationship between confession, the view of God and spiritual life

It was typical for both source materials that the confessants’ view of God could not be clearly figured out. Indirect ideas could still be deduced on the basis of the confessants’ stories. The view of God was often communicated through ideas, experiences or expectations concerning the confessor’s person. The views of God and the confessor were merged. The confessant met God in the person of the confessor and God was perceived as the confessor. This means that the responsibility of the confessor is huge. He/she does not only stand for him/herself but also for God, whom the confessant identifies him/her with (KETTUNEN 1998, 392; JOÓB 2006, 149).²² According to the Finnish study, it is impossible to draft a common picture of God for each confessant. It seems they have different images of God, the emphasis of which changes during their lifetime and because of different situations. For some people, a change in their view of God is a threat, while it means hope and freedom for others. The Finnish study showed that different confessional practices and situations reveal different elements in the view of God. Transitional confession and the Laestadian way of purification hint at an alluring and fascinating view of God (using the terminology of psychoanalytical object relation theory):²³ a God that forgives everything and satisfies everyone’s needs. One-off confessants often see an omnipotent God who takes all bad feelings and guilt away quickly and at once. This God cannot be frail but strong, active and able to take away all pain and anxiety. This God does not come near but stays on his distant throne. In pastoral confession, God’s gracefulness and love rather than his omnipotence are in the centre: these are expressed by God’s presence, his walking along with us. He does not take away guilt and distress but takes the burden upon himself and carries it along after it has been confessed

²¹ This happens, for example, when guilt connected to sexual life is only interpreted from a moralistic point of view and absolution is pronounced. The emotions belonging to every created person are ignored.

²² Theologically it is an important differentiation whether the confessor acts as a deputy for God or Christ in the confessional situation or whether he/she is in a mediator’s role. In the latter case, the situation is threefold: there are three parties present. The confessant and the confessor are face to face but there is also a Third Party. The confessor is not the Third Party, he/she is not God or Christ but a mere mediator of His word, love and grace. But if the confessor stands for God or Christ, there are only two parties in the situation. The confessant sees God or Christ in the confessor. The key point is what kind of God or Christ the confessant sees in the confessor. The confessor can sometimes be loving and graceful, at other times judgemental and distant. Based on Finnish confession research sources, this experience is not static either: the same person can appear different at each time (KETTUNEN 1998, 394).

²³ Psychoanalytic object relation theory is used here along the lines of the basic ideas of relations theory by Matti HYRCK. People’s inner ideas of God are the central elements of this theory. See 1997, 64–76; KETTUNEN 1998, 74–78.

(*Container* function). This is more of a deputy-type and a healer-type view of God (KETTUNEN 1998, 470–72). Finnish respondents write a lot about conscience. This hints that they have a demanding view of God. Bad conscience refers to a God who claims justice, truth and justification. Such a God sets high ethical standards for mankind. The demanding God wants an ethically high standard of life, but on the other hand, he offers forgiveness to the sinful and penitent (472–73). From the confessional point of view, it is important to see that except for the healer, all other object relations include, to some extent, the view of an omnipotent God. The alluring and fascinating type offers total satisfaction while the governor has an authority not to be questioned. The view of a withdrawing God refers to the absolute being, very far away. The demanding God wants a morally spotless life. For the respondents, a Christian life seems to involve believing in a governor or a demanding type of God (KETTUNEN 1998, 474).

JOÓB claims that the view of God in Hungarian responses is dominantly that of the deputy and the healer. Only a few respondents write about expectations mirroring a view of a governor God (2006, 153). The characteristics of the deputy and healer were especially strong in those letters, which described confession making as the condition that made taking communion possible again. This was so positive for many penitent people that it had an influence on their view of God (165–170). For many Hungarian respondents, writing about their spiritual life was a central element. On the contrary, Finnish confessants hardly mentioned their view of God or their spiritual life. For Hungarians, the reason could be that for many respondents, living in a regular confessional practice and taking care of their spiritual life were close – for many confessants even identical – concepts. This approach was very general among Hungarian Catholic and Finnish Orthodox respondents (KETTUNEN 1998, 396–97, 468; JOÓB 2006, 210).²⁴ Confession is not only a place for receiving absolution but an opportunity to grow and prosper in spiritual life (JOÓB 2006, 219). From this point of view it is clear why many people became more active in confession when problems appeared in their spiritual life. Although the majority of the Finnish confessants did not write about their spiritual life a lot, they still took it as a considerable source of power in their life. When using confession as a tool for spiritual care, the focus was on healing and maintaining the relationship with God or clarifying one's view of God, and often also on supporting religious confidence (KETTUNEN 1998, 467–68).

Confession as taking care of one's spiritual life is related to an individualised spirituality. It is based on personal experience about one's life, reality, conflicts of life, insecurity and anxiety. The experience has its roots in the immanent reality of the person, not in the transcendent one. Our spiritual life and relationship with God mirror the realities and meanings of this world to God and transcendence. Interestingly, spiritual life also often sticks to this reality. It is not fully changed through confession

²⁴ In more than one fourth of the Finnish letters, confession was accompanied with prayer or blessing. While Orthodox confessants define confession more as taking care of one's spiritual life than others, they criticise sacramental confession and desire more possibilities for pastoral conversation.

and absolution. Sinfulness and guilt on account of community matters does not belong to the reality of spiritual life, neither before confession nor after that. The source material shows that people do not strive for confession because righteousness has not been fulfilled but out of a worry for their own spiritual welfare. This also shows that the persons using confession as a tool for taking care of their spiritual life have pietistic views (THAYER 1985, 56–57, 69; KETTUNEN 1998, 403–04, 468).

On the basis of the Hungarian material it seems that for Catholic confessants it is easy to ‘find’ an opportunity for confession. The role of a religious education that stresses the importance of private confession can be clearly seen here, along with the teaching of the Church, which holds that everybody should confess at least once a year. Many letter writers hinted that they did not go to confession in order to confess an actual sin but to seek help in questions regarding their spiritual and everyday life and to share their problems (JOÓB 2006, 72).²⁵ Dealing with such questions in a confessional situation can help the believers to see their own responsibility. In confession, everybody deals with his/her own problems and questions and confesses his/her own sins. The focus is not on what somebody else has done but on how he/she him-/herself has acted. It is problematic both from the practical and the theological point of view if all issues in spiritual and everyday life are interpreted from the sin perspective. It is good to pay attention to this because, as we earlier stated, for many confessants, practising regular confession and maintaining their spiritual life are very close to each other. Confessants often stated that in addition to confession and spiritual counselling they had a need for pastoral and group discussions,²⁶ which would help the believers solve their problems.

8. Discussion

When examining these Finnish and Hungarian studies on confession, it is important to note that this was the first time in both countries when scholars looked at personal experiences of confession. The attitude was not a statistical one (how many people practise confession). It was not dogmatic either (what the Church says about confession). Still, both of these questions have been looked at in the scope of the study. For the Finnish respondents, the most important question was not if they practiced confession in its historical meaning. They now look for confessional practices different from the inheritance of past centuries. In view of this, the borderline between confession and pastoral care is shifting. If one wishes to look at confession from an

²⁵ This practice appeared most frequently in the Protestant writers’ letters.

²⁶ Although the next theory originates from a very different environment, it can well be adapted to the operation of a helpers’ group solving religious and everyday problems. The members of the groups can offer the following to each other: conversational community (telling), the interest of a helping community (listening), the stability of an integrative community (satisfaction), realities of an evaluative community (evaluation), questions coming from a motivating community (interest) and the renewing power of a spiritual group (SZABÓ 2002, 62).

angle of statistics, it is worth comparing the sum of confessions and pastoral conversations in different eras (KETTUNEN 1998, 504–05). If we define confession based on its function (liberating and helping people), it seems a well-grounded suggestion that confession has been increasingly used in Finland. Often pastoral conversations and other forms of assistance have taken over the function formerly taken by confession (KETTUNEN 2002, 25).²⁷

However, the Hungarian sources do not support these findings. This comes from the fact that in Hungary, confession is mostly understood in its historical context: as actual confession and absolution. On the other hand, at the time of conducting this research in Hungary, the development of methods of pastoral care was inferior compared to the Finnish situation. The shift of the confession's function towards pastoral care is not as noticeably observable in Hungary as in Finland. In the Lutheran context, this may originate from the fact that the development of pastoral care methods only started after the end of the Socialist era. When looking at the Roman Catholic and Orthodox respondents, one has to keep in mind that confession is a sacrament in these churches, both in Finland and in Hungary. It is a tool through which God (with the help of the priest) pours his grace and forgiveness upon the confessant. From the point of view of these churches, the promotion of confession is theologically based, in that for them the function of confession is not realised in a pastoral conversation. In Hungary, research has shown that one reason for the decreasing confessional practice is that the concept of sin is not clear anymore (OROSZ & VÉRTESALJAI 1985, 153; BOURGEOIS 1999, 430–31). This is also true when it comes to discussing sin, guilt and moral questions in general. Before the age of enlightenment, Churches had a strong role in defining moral rules and Christians were more confident in what was against the will of God and what belonged to the scope of confession. It is very clear from the letters that today the situation has changed. Even those practising confession regularly are sometimes not sure what they have to confess (JOÓB 2006, 206). Thus, it is understandable that many confessants would like to change the present confessional practice.

The changes in the confessional situation have to be looked at in light of the emergence of confession. One reason for the uneasiness about confession in many churches worldwide is the difference between the world views of medieval and modern times, and between the concepts of man and of sin in the two eras. The concept of man used in confession is based on the reality at the time of its emergence, i.e. the Middle Ages. Then, the Church defined clearly what was right and wrong. Living according to the rules of the Church meant being redeemed. Non-adherence to the rules was a way to damnation. For the sinner, confession was a way to integrate again into the salvation offered by the Church. People in the 21st century do not define right and

²⁷ If we take forgiveness, grace and liberation as the main functions of confession, confessing 'correctly' is of marginal importance. The main thing is whether the person gets help or not. Therefore, no confessional practice can be canonised. From this perspective, speaking about the *revival of confession* is meaningless. It would be more precise to speak about the *revival of helping people* and finding ways in which forgiveness and grace can be realised best (KETTUNEN 1998, 505).

wrong in this context anymore. Their problems seem to be more complex and the ways to find help are also more varied (KETTUNEN 1998, 41, 514).

The role of private confession is still unique in the Roman Catholic Church. It seems that it is hard to replace it with other confessional practices even if there had been an opportunity to do that historically. Due to its position as a sacrament, private confession is theologically prioritised over other forms of confession (JOÓB 2006, 56–57).²⁸ It can be an opportunity to take care of one's spiritual life but it can also operate independently of it. The sacramental characteristic can also lead to a use of confession unconnected to spiritual life, in a mechanical manner. It is apparent from the source material that an *ex opere operato* usage of the sacrament has a negative effect on the depth of confession, leaving the confessant in a passive role (144).

If the aim of confessional practice is to express a possibly very strong sense of absolution, it is worth looking at the present form and content matters. Formwise, there are considerable differences between the Roman Catholic and the Lutheran practices. The Roman Catholic confessional practice is based on a tradition dating back a few hundred years and it was last confirmed at the second Vatican Council. The decision of the synod (better known as *Ordo Paenitentiae*) gives the opportunity to the ordained priest (who is given permit to receive confessions and who represents the salvation function of the Church) to adapt private confessional practice to the needs of the believers. The letters show a desire for confession outside of the confessional too (201–04). On the formal side, there are also expectations concerning the customary length of the confession (205–09). For those who only want to fulfil a duty, the general practice of spending a few minutes in the confessional is enough. Many people, however, feel a desire for confession where problems and questions could be discussed in detail and solutions found together (208).

The Finnish and Hungarian results show that the use of confession often shows a very unbalanced view of human distress. Distress is looked at from the point of view of sin and sinfulness. In this way grief, shame, solitude, and pain that come from an inferiority complex or lack of being loved – all experiences for which people may seek help through confession – are not healed during the confessional situation. These problems cannot be erased by absolution. In addition, shame is often mixed up with guilt. This is theologically problematic, just as is blurring anxiety with guilt. Based on all letters received, it can be generally stated that people in both countries seek help from confession for a much larger issue than simply sin or sinfulness. Which means the tools the confessor applies also have to be more varied and not restricted to absolution. Besides, one must note that for many people confession (confessing a sin and sinfulness and receiving forgiveness) is a very important and

²⁸ *Ordo Paenitentiae* defines three forms of confessional practice: 1. private confession and private absolution, 2. general confession and private absolution, 3. general confession and general absolution. The last one can only be used in special cases, for example crises. For those taking part in this, private confession is compulsory within a year. Only synods can define such special cases but in Hungary this has not occurred up until now. Therefore, for the Hungarian Catholics the only formally allowed practice is sacramental private confession (*Bűnbocsánat és oltáriszentség szertartáskönyv* 1976, 8).

healing sacrament and a form of pastoral care. In order for it to work in a suitable way for the person in question, confrontation should be used in confession too. This would help to find the best possible way to handle each person who is seeking help (KETTUNEN 1998, 378, 511–15).

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