Father Forgive Me for I Have Trolled:

Re-Imagining the Scope of Religious Confession in the Digital World

Michael J. Toy

Princeton Theological Seminary
Abstract

Today, if you ask any Roman Catholic or Anglican priest about their parishioners’ frequency of practicing confession, he or she would almost certainly tell you that there has been a decline in the number of those who come to the confessional. Statistical research from one Georgetown report supports this observation of the decline of confession in the church (Gray and Perl 2008). While ecclesial confessions are certainly performed by fewer and fewer people, digital technology has opened the floodgates to a new kind of anonymous confession. This paper seeks to thicken our conception of the study of religion through a re-imagination of religious scholarship in a digital age. The first section of this essay will address the problem that anonymity and automation prevents data in the digital sphere from necessarily corresponding to activity in the physical sphere within which human beings live, breath, talk, and act. Next, we will examine possible solutions to this problem of mapping humans to digital activity. To ground theory in practice, we will explore the way forward through an analysis of digital confessions through the lens of Foucauldian power structures and media effects. As Christianity plunges further into a digitally-saturated environment, pastors and theologians alike must take heed of the changing landscape of confession, remaining ever aware of the Church body’s psychological, pastoral, and theological needs.

Keywords: confession, digital humanities, mobile apps, media effects
“I slept with someone I shouldn’t have. Kill me now.”


“i like to rolelays [sic]. i go dirty when i do rp. i can play any character, even incest but i also feel guilty... may GOD forgive me.”

– Anonymous, Secret #62993, www.secretsanon.com

“I’ve had sex in the gym parking lot for 10 years. We are both over 60 and married to others.”


**Introduction**

Today, if you ask any Roman Catholic or Anglican priest about their parishioners’ frequency of practicing confession, he or she would almost certainly tell you that there has been a decline in the number of those who come to the confessional. Statistical research from one Georgetown report supports this observation of the decline of confession in the church (Gray and Perl, 2008). While the secularization thesis of Max Weber is in high contention, data seems to indicate a decline in religious behavior as well as religious affiliation in the United States (Pew Research Foundation, 2010). Though ecclesial confessions are certainly performed by fewer and fewer people, digital technology has opened the floodgates to a new kind of anonymous confession. Brian Brock (2013) noted that in the digital age the blogpost becomes an *ersatz* confessional, a window into the life of a parishoner. These *ersatz* confessionals are not limited to blogposts or forums but are popping up all over the digital landscape. In the past year alone,
the anonymous posting mobile apps Secret, Yik Yak, and PostSecret have made the news. Police have apprehended more than one criminal who confessed to crimes via social media. As the epigraphs above demonstrate, the practice of confessing actions that induce guilt and shame—or that one thinks are wrong in some sense—flourishes across the digital landscape. I selected these confessions because they fall into a pattern that Michel Foucault (1978) noted has been occurring since the beginnings of the church, “From the Christian penance to the present day, sex was a privileged theme of confession (p. 61).” Continuing this offline theme found in ecclesial confessionals, confessions related to sexuality are especially at home in the digital realm.¹ In this paper I aim to ask first, “What are these digital confessionals?” and secondly, “How do they relate to the traditional ecclesial confessionals?”

I set out to compare these digital confessions to offline religious practice, but I quickly ran into a major problem. Certainly, these confessions look like the kind of self-disclosure of guilty or shameful behavior that is similar to sacramental confession in the church, but one particularly problematic issue arises: are these confessions authentic?² By authentic, I mean, do these confessions correlate to actual events, thoughts, or actions performed by human beings?

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¹ For an extended argument about why the Catholic Church’s practice of confession promoted revelations of sexual sins particularly, see Cornwell (2014), The dark box: A secret history of confession.

² I use the word “sacramental” here to refer to the ecclesial practice of confession in all churches even though that word may not be used within every tradition. For instance, in my own tradition, the Episcopal Church categorizes confession among five “sacramental rites.” Though traditionally Protestants only have two Sacraments, baptism and the Eucharist, confession was instituted by Christ and is often seen as a means of grace, earning it a rank among lesser sacramental acts (Bonhoeffer, 1954, p.111).
Two main issues contribute to the inability to determine the nature of these online confessions. The first is that there is no guarantee that the online confessors are telling the truth. That is, of course, nothing new and is a similar challenge in the wooden confessional in the church. To borrow the words of the 19th century poet Paul Laurence Dunbar (1913), “We wear the mask that grins and lies/it hides our cheeks and shades our eyes.” But researchers Wiszniewski and Coyne (2002) have noted that there are myriad features unique to digital and online technologies that encourage users to further mask their identities, lie or fabricate events or actions. The second issue is that there is no guarantee of one-to-one correspondence between users of a particular site or network and actual human beings. Without the aid of a highly sophisticated technological guru of the caliber of the National Security Agency, it is almost impossible to locate and map a user on a Social Network System (SNS) or online forum to a person. That opens the possibility for digital users to create multiple accounts and adopt multiple identities. While many sites, such as Facebook, stipulate in their terms of agreement that each user will only create one personal profile, with the progression of automation, “click farms,” and artificial intelligence, there is no guarantee that human beings are behind SNS accounts. While the “bots” or automated accounts are mostly on online chat rooms, without doubt, they will soon be able to identify the numbers on the screen of the “prove you are human” tests on other sites and apps as soon as it becomes profitable for them to do so. In fact, the recent release of Google’s “No Capture ReCapture” demonstrates the need for continued developments in security against automated software. It is only a matter of time before keywords or content on digital posts become available for sale to the highest bidder, if they are not already for sale (Clark, 2015; Mendelson, 2012).

This paper seeks to thicken our conception of the study of religion through a re-imagination of religious scholarship in a digital age. The first section of this essay will elaborate
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upon the problem that emerged above: activity in the digital sphere does not necessarily correspond to activity in the physical sphere within which human beings live, breath, talk, and act. Next, we will examine possible solutions to this problem of mapping humans to digital activity. To ground theory in practice, we will explore the way forward by continuing our analysis of digital confessions. Before we attempt to get a handle on tackling these issues on the level of digital confession, let us zoom out to the level of the field of religious studies.

A Bigger Issue

Confession is not the only practice changing with new technologies. As civilization continues to charge forth into the digital age, the study of religion is not untouched. Already, classes are being integrated with digital technology with flipped-classroom environments; classes in graduate study invariably assign at least one text found on e-reserve or an online database. And, while the classroom tools of studying religion evolve with the digital age, the scope of religious studies has expanded. With the advent of Internet 3.0, scholars of religion have turned to digital and virtual worlds, analyzing the shape of religion in the online sphere. The ubiquity of digital technology, the increase in computing power, and the ability to perform metadata analysis open up new doors, new questions, and new challenges to religious studies.

Traditionally, the study of religion included documentation and analysis of behavior and thought associated with sacred rituals, practices, and beliefs of human beings. It is no new concept that the medium affects the content of the message, and the anonymity, the open structure, and the

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3 Internet 3.0 is distinguished from Internet 1.0 (read-only content) or Internet 2.0 (user-generated content such as blogs, Social Networks, and internet communities) by the user experience being tailored based upon an individual’s habits, preferences, and history.

4 For an overview of the field as it stands now, see Morgan (2013).
instantaneous nature of digital technology affects the shape of religious thought and behavior online. The questions that arise as more and more religious content moves onto the digital sphere are questions that force a reevaluation of methodology, power structures, and even content of study. Media studies and sociology have demonstrated that there is a significant disconnect between online and offline speech, behavior, and even thought. Most of us have experienced this personally through reading comments on blogposts or Youtube, infamous for being more inflammatory and aggressive than socially acceptable, even becoming verbal abuse and hate speech (Citron, 2014). Recent research by Yee and Bailenson (2007) has opened up doors of study into the two-way avenue of digital-analog relationship, examining how changes in digital interaction can, in turn, influence offline interpersonal interactions. Because of this divergence (and re-convergence) between online and offline behavior, when studying religion in the digital sphere, we must ask: is this still the study of human religion? For example, often, as in an analysis of a Twitter search term, the content of study is so mediated that it is unmappable to real, living people. Analysis on certain “Twitterati” reveals that many of these Twitter users who have amassed thousands upon thousands of followers have artificially inflated their digital presence by automated bots which follow and retweet their status updates. Does this inability to map online content to human beings place this kind of digital analysis outside the bounds of the field of humanities and thus outside the bounds of religious studies? This is the problem posed to researchers by exclusively digital data.

**Encountering Problems**

Let us explore this problem through a concrete example of a Reddit confession. “I am a pedophile and I can’t wait to die.” This was posted on April 2, 2015 on a Reddit thread (known
as a subreddit) “Confession,” a place where users can reveal information about themselves to anyone in the public with internet access in one of three categories (Figure 1).

Figure 1: Submission rules for Confession subreddit on Reddit.com

The tag “Remorse” indicates that the user feels badly for his or her actions. “No regrets” indicates that the poster does not feel bad. And a third category, “Light,” is for users with funny or lighthearted confessions. This user, cantwaittodie0192837, posted a lengthy confession of his sexual attraction to young children in the “Remorse” category, and the Reddit community responded with 165 comments ranging across advice, empathy and sympathy, as well as a story of another user’s own abuse by a child molester (2015). The original poster (2015), after reading these comments and responding to many of them individually edited his original post, appending:

EDIT: Thank you all so much for you comments. The compassion and empathy of this community has far surpassed my expectations and I am starting to feel better about myself already. I have reached out to
Virtuous Pedophiles as many of you have suggested and am going to consult a doctor about treatment for this depression. Thank you for not calling me a monster and reinforcing that wicked voice in my head. It's difficult to put into words how much your support means. I love you guys :)

This is a touching example of the Reddit community—known for being hegemonic, misogynistic, hetero-normative, and privileged—responding in a way that is supportive. On the surface this seems like an ideal example of an internet confession with strong analogy to ecclesial confession in which the confessor received validation and acquittal of shame, along with advice for future action. The only problem is that due to the nature of the site, there is no evidence that this is actually a real person or someone who is merely fabricating the whole thing.

The internet is full of trolls, and Reddit is not an exception. Trolls are those who roam the internet in search of people to mislead, belittle, or attack just for the joy of it. Who wrote this post? Is it true? If not, does it reflect a fantasy? Or is it merely a troll? These are questions we cannot answer with the given information. While this certainly looks like an authentic confession, there is no evidence that the poster is who he claims to be, nor is there any way of finding out without extensive technical excavation with no promise of results.

Activity in the digital sphere does not necessarily correspond to human activity, and even if it does, there are no guaranteed ways to know. While the study of religion through traditional means, such as ethnography, is also always at risk of its constituents being dishonest or misreporting, the anonymity of the internet breeds trolls and impersonators (Digital Media and Culture Yearbook 2014, 2014). Using the traditional definition of religious studies, this data proves to be outside the bounds of the humanities, for it is unmappable to actual human belief or behavior. What then are we to do with this data? It cannot be ignored, for it is part of the digital landscape in which millions of people participate every day. Not only do almost 90% of individuals in the US have internet access in their homes, but over 64% of U.S. adults own
smartphones, according to a recent Pew report (2014). There are a plethora of anonymous confession apps arising, such as Secret, Whisper, Let’s Confess (Figure 2), Yik Yak, and a new PostSecret App, in addition to multiple online sites for confession that do not show signs of falling out of use (Roose, 2014).

![Let's Confess](image)

**Figure 2:** Let's Confess, a mobile confession application

Online confession is not necessarily an overtly explicit religious phenomenon. Religious-like behavior is taking place across the digital world, and for the first time perhaps in history, researchers are presented with an overabundance of data—searchable and minable only by computer programs. Researchers are no longer dependent upon survey respondents or college students participating in research studies for extra credit. But though we can now mine and analyze the digital data using complex algorithms and research tools, there is no guarantee we can map this data to any group of humans. The problem is that humanity fields seek to tell us
something about humans, and what we have through digital and online data has no guarantee of
telling us anything definitive about living, breathing human beings.

**New Methods**

Are we to peel back the layers of digital activity in an attempt to get to the humans who are typing, pushing buttons, or writing code? Or are we to keep our analysis on the digital level without seeking out the human actors behind the screens? Or is there a third way? The problem with the first approach is that anonymity is a key feature of the digital world. True, there is never any real anonymity or ways to erase one’s digital footprint, but there are very few with access to those records. Another method of connecting digital to analog would require some kind of verification of every post or datum, a task unfeasible given the amount of data and human constraints such as time and funding. The second approach allows one to analyze the data without worrying about the inability to say concrete things about human behavior or thought, but that inability removes this approach from the field of humanities (and even digital humanities). A third approach recognizes the limits of the digital data and acknowledges that this digital environment or ecosystem invites human participation. This third way takes into account the chasm between digital activity and offline human behavior but still seeks to ground the data in humanistic questions and lines of inquiry. This third approach requires researchers of religious studies to analyze the digital data, human thought and behavior, *as well as the lines that connect the two*. Even if there are no truly authentic confessions occurring in online forums, we learn something about humanity through exploring the available forums and the content that fills the online confessionals. In other words, we need not worry over each and every post’s authenticity, but we must recognize it as part of the digital landscape filled with truth, half-truths, fact, and fiction. Thus, the kind of questions we ask of the data must change.
Forward through Analysis

We have noted that the digital data is quite separate from the behavior of human beings on the ground, so to speak. But there are lines that connect the two, and examining these lines can be a fruitful endeavor. Let us explore just one example: confession related to sex. We noted above that historically, sex has been a “privileged theme of confession” in Foucault’s account as well as in even a cursory exploration of digital confession. What drives this connection or parallel? Foucault (1978) noted:

What sustains our eagerness to speak of sex in terms of repression is doubtless this opportunity to speak out against the powers that be, to utter truths and promise bliss, to link together enlightenment, liberation, and manifold pleasures; to pronounce a discourse that combines the fervor of knowledge, the determination to change the laws, and the longing for the garden of earthly delights (p. 7).

The state, the church, and society all contribute to the political structure that encourages confession of sexual behavior. This eagerness to confess one’s sexual exploits, thoughts, or feelings could be motivated by any number of “powers” to use Foucauldian terms.

In some instances of digital confession, one may find that legitimate shame or guilt drives a desire for forgiveness and absolution, as the apparent remorse of the Redditor’s post above indicates. In these cases, a post will express remorse or regret over actions that are perceived as negative by the community or the individual poster. This motivation for confession is driven by an internal need for absolution or forgiveness, met by a community that responds with empathy, acceptance, and understanding. Anna Poletti (2011) builds on Lauren Berlant’s theory of Intimate Economies to argue in her article “Intimate Economies: Postsecret and the affect of confession” that the act of confessing is the buy-in to participate in the community. Members of a community reveal information about themselves as a way to contribute to the digitally public
intimate economy. One participant in Postsecret expressed feeling closer to other secret sharers on PostSecret than those in “real life” (Figure 3).

**Figure 3**: Scanned image on PostSecret Universe, the mobile application version of PostSecret. This contribution allows them to participate in the community, assuaging the desire of guilt or shame with the feeling of belonging and acceptance. While there may be forces of shame or guilt driving the human user to post a confession, the community plays an important role in encouraging, facilitating, and mandating user participation in an act of shameful self-disclosure. This is not dissimilar to a Christian theology of confession. For some Roman Catholics, confession is a necessary step one must take before participation in communion or Eucharist. Lutheran theologian Dietrich Bonhoeffer wrote in *Life Together* (1954) that it is the act of confession of sins that breaks down the walls that prevent fellowship or true Christian community (p. 110). But not all confession is motivated by a desire for fellowship or community.

In other cases, one finds a façade of shame hiding the real motivation to entertain oneself or others through spectacle or bravado. This example demonstrates the power of the medium
influencing the content produced. Social media networks, online news, and even online advertisements have placed entertainment as the bedrock of digital media structure. Online news sources revert to “clickbait” strategies to lure a reader into an article that promises salacious entertainment. Marketers on Youtube or Facebook have constructed advertisements that appear to be games or are themselves share-worthy segments with the potential to go viral. The force driving the success of viral marketing is the desire for entertainment. It should thus come as no surprise that the desire to match the level of entertainment on these media drives people to confess their sexual exploits as a way to participate in the pornographically influenced entertainment genre of the digital sphere. Most trolling behavior falls into this category, as the trolls act in a way to entertain either themselves or an audience. In a world where few things are ostentatious or salacious enough to raise eyebrows anymore, the public confession of a taboo deed or desire serves as a source of entertainment not only for the poster, but also for those seeking to be entertained. Here we find something quite dissimilar to the ecclesial practice of confession, and yet in some ways it is not so different. In ecclesial confession practices, an individual confesses her or his sins to another who stands in as Christ to proclaim forgiveness and absolution, resulting in unburdening, acceptance, and community. The confessor is validated as a human being who is flawed yet accepted within the communion of the Church. When someone posts a confession to entertain others, she or he receives validation through approval of the community as it shares, comments on, upvotes, or likes a post. While digital confession may be deeply akin to the religious practice of confession, there are elements unique to the sacrament of in person confession in the ecclesial setting. Nevertheless, the similarities between ecclesial and digital confession are too significant to cast the latter as thoroughly irreligious. Noticeably absent from both of these examples of possible motivators of confession
is a declaration of absolution or forgiveness. For some, religion may be a factor driving confession. For others, residual religious practices or politics (to borrow the Foucauldian term) drive online confession. And for others still, though religious beliefs and structures may have nothing to do with online confession, individuals may turn to these digital confessionals to meet the human needs of community, belonging, acceptance, and validation that were met in generations past through religion.

Through examining the lines of motivation or power structures that stimulate digital confession, we gain a new lens of analysis into these digital confessions as well as a new understanding of mediated human interaction. By identifying the architecture or media bias that facilitates online confession, we gain insight into the structure of digitally networked communities. In the above example, digital media’s pressure on users to entertain opens up questions of how confession-style posts fit into the broader spectrum of entertainment. Study of these power structures also gives us hints at the needs and impulses of humanity that are amplified by digital media. What implications does the urge to entertain have on psychology, sociology, or in my line of study, religious studies? Does the urge for connection in anonymous online communities speak to a lack of offline connection? These are just a few of the kinds of questions that appear when examining the lines that connect the digital data to offline behavior.

Conclusion

We started with the premise that the field of religious studies, along with all of the humanities, is interested in human actions, thought, beliefs, and behavior. The advent of the digital age created data that is unmappable to human beings, posing a problem for those wishing to study religious behavior online. The solution to this problem is not to ignore one category in favor of the other but to seek out the lines that connect the two realms, studying both content and
medium as an environment in which humans now participate. The object in the field of religious studies must be re-imagined to include not only the digital data but also the lines that connect the digital to the analog, the “cloud” to the ground. In this line of study, we learn more about human behavior in examining what drives digital activity. Conversely, we learn more about digital activity by analyzing the connections and disconnections with our understanding of humans in offline arenas. The digital world is here to stay. And it seems like the practice of confession is here to stay as well, though it may take on new forms. As we learn more about digital confession, I remain hopeful that we will learn more about the human act of confession in an ecclesial context. In studying the history of human confession, we can gain insight into the digital politics, and explore the power structures that surround digital confession. Foucault’s words from 1978 still ring true today:

The obligation to confess is now relayed through so many different points, ‘is so deeply in grained in us, that we no longer perceive it as the effect of a power that constrains us; on the contrary, it seems to us that truth, lodged in our most secret nature, "demands" only to surface; that if it fails to do so, this is because a constraint holds it in place, the violence of a power weighs it down, and it can finally be articulated only at the price of a kind of liberation (p. 60).

Human beings are confessing creatures, whether in person or digitally. The digital humanities in religious studies can offer us insight into these “obligations to confess” and the power structures that surround the act of confession. Through this line of study, I hope that we can identify the factors online and offline that allow for self-expression, community support, validation, and the healthy benefits of confession while simultaneously identifying the factors that drive the decline of sacramental confession.
References


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