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**Confession? There's an app for that**

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Q. A new app for the iPhone and iPad allows people to make confession with a virtual priest. According to its makers, the “Confession: A Roman Catholic App,” which is on sale at Apple's iTunes store, offers “a personalized examination of conscience for each user.”

The user enters personal data such as sex, age and marital status, and is presented with a list of check-boxes to describe their sins and who, if anyone, they've offended. A second page allows the penitent to enter a list of lapses. Pressing the “finish” button brings up a random spiritual quote from a Catholic saint. The app also displays lists of prayers and the Acts of Contrition.

The makers have stressed that the app isn't supposed to replace attending confession in person, and senior members of the Catholic Church in America and the UK have approved the program. Its makers say they were inspired by a recent speech by the Pope in which he urged Christians to use new digital and social media.

Is this app a good idea and could it be a benefit to believers? Or does the idea of “confessing” to a piece of software devalue the sacrament and trivialize its importance? Are there any other similar religious rites that you'd like to see appear on phones and computers?

Answer:

I am very uncomfortable making negative judgments about the rituals others employ in the practice of their religious beliefs, as long as no one is being harmed. Nor would I want others to feel called upon to disparage the ways in which I practice my religion, with the same caveat about harm. I believe that once we begin making critical remarks about the religious practices of others, we are just one short step away from devaluing their religions in toto.

The formal ritual of confession such as the one in the Roman Catholic Church is not a usual part of Unitarian Universalist practice. Because we believe that all people are born good rather than with original sin, there is no expectation that we would have a regular habit of confession to remove offenses against God. That is not to say that we never do anything wrong. It is simply that expiation for sin is not a part of our ritual.

But I think the larger question for this discussion is how we can express our regret for having done something that is harmful to ourselves or others, actions that we cannot seem to avoid as human beings. I am convinced that for each of us, that expression of remorse is important if we hope to live with integrity. The problem is how we can most effectively bring about reconciliation and restitution for the wrongs we inevitably do.

That being said, the ways in which we can atone for our misdeeds may be as varied as the people who practice them. If applications created for the iPhone or iPad can bring about a sense of relief for Catholic and other people, who are we to say that there is something wrong with that? The important thing for me as a person of faith is that we should live in ways that express our best selves. I am not sure how a means to accomplish that end can be seen as wrong.

The Rev. Dr. Betty Stapleford  
Unitarian Universalist Church Of the Verdugo Hills  
La Crescenta

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Why not? All prayer is good. If this keeps prayer in front of people, then I'm all for it.

I doubt it will replace, or ever be seen as replacing, confession in person to a priest. The whole beauty of confession is that while we know intellectually that God forgives us, sometimes we need to hear it said out loud by a real live person. I think the iPhone app is more along the lines of intellectual knowing, and people will still seek out the real live person when they need to hear the love.

In the Episcopal tradition, more takes place during confession than the absolution. It's really more like spiritual direction, where there's some dialogue, some comfort, some advice, maybe a recommendation for how to free the soul further. You can't really get that from an app — at least not yet.

And actually, there's something to be said for the not-in-person form of confession. In the olden days (10 years ago) some churches set up dedicated phone lines that went to answering machines. People would call and confess their sins anonymously to the answering machine. It just helped them to say it out loud and get it out of their system without the intimidation factor of dealing with someone's response.

“My thoughts are not your thoughts, nor are your ways my ways, says the Lord. For as the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways and my thoughts than your thoughts. For as the rain and the snow come down from heaven, and do not return there until they have watered the earth, making it bring forth and sprout, giving seed to the sower and bread to the eater, so shall my word be that goes out from my mouth; it shall not return to me empty, but it shall accomplish that which I purpose, and succeed in the thing for which I sent it” (Isaiah 55:8-11).

Apparently, God's latest mysterious ways have gone digital. Who knew?

The Rev. Amy Pringle

St. George's Episcopal Church

La Cañada Flintridge

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The Christian faith is all about being rightly related to God through a personal relationship with Jesus Christ. Our sins alienate us from God. Jesus paid the penalty for all of them by giving up his life on the cross. God justifies us (makes us right with himself) when we have personal faith in that act of Jesus on the cross and then commit our lives to Jesus as our lord and savior.

When we're thus saved, God's Spirit comes to dwell in our hearts eternally. In all of this we see personal interaction with God. His greatest commands are to love him with all of our hearts, and to love others as ourselves. It always comes down to relationship and not just what I do by myself with my software.

So while a confession app on an iPhone may truly be helpful to the extent by reminding us that God forgives us and that he loves us, it will always fall short if we don't approach God personally and with penitence, claiming his one sacrifice for our sins: the blood of Jesus Christ.

Pastor Jon Barta

Valley Baptist Church

Burbank

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As a Protestant, I'm not going to have much favorable to say about an application that perpetuates what I believe to be an error at its root. Biblical confession is a matter of believers mutually sharing spiritual difficulties and leaning on one another for support to overcome them (James 5:16). It isn't about going into a box and revealing lurid details of your dark side to a guy behind the curtain.

I've always wondered about priests that sit listening to endless confessions about masturbation and petty crime, afterward retaining the knowledge of every unsavory aspect of their parishioners' lives. While I'm sure they generally view this information as a sacred trust, it has been used against people in times past by those in authority, including the priests themselves (no offense to the thousands of ethically well-behaved).

The go-between nature of priestly confession also contradicts the Gospel message of direct access to God with direct forgiveness, since the only mediator between God and man is Jesus Christ, according to Scripture (1Timothy 2:5). Adding yet another middle-link in the equation seems all the more convoluted. Now, instead of interacting with fellow Christians, let alone a mediating man in black, there's this passionless piece of programmed plastic that spews random quotes from dead saints like a Magic 8-Ball. This, after putting in vital information that could be hijacked or stolen, and once again, used against you. Imagine confessing to illicit thoughts or secret illegalities only to have them discovered by someone who gets a hold of your phone. Yikes!

I do believe that every advance in technology should be utilized for the sake of Christ, and there are already daily devotionals, Bible reading programs and other things available for Christians to use. But whether composing a Catholic iPhone confession will live beyond this app's current novelty, we'll see.

Rev. Bryan Griem

Montrose Community Church

Montrose

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As soon as I heard about Confession: A Roman Catholic App, I bought it. I read the whole thing through and was really impressed. It is a beautiful and helpful guide to the sacrament of reconciliation.

It states from the beginning that it is merely a guide and nothing more. It is a preparation for the celebration of the sacrament and certainly not the celebration itself. The celebration takes place within the church community and not (obviously) on a computer.

The app speaks beautifully about what the sacrament is, its meaning, why a person would want to celebrate it. It leads the person through a beautiful and most helpful examination of conscience, describes how a sacramental experience might work out in fact, and ends with a group of prayers one might say in preparation for the sacrament.

I read that some think there are some pervasive, personal questions that need to be answered before you begin to use the app. I answered the questions. I did not find them pervasive nor overly personal. The obvious reason for them is so that the examination of conscience makes sense to the user.

Does this app provide reconciliation or the forgiveness of sin? Of course it does not. It never even suggests that. Reconciliation, or the forgiveness of sin, is a sacrament. It is the experience of Christ healing us, the most personal experience of Christ, which obviously cannot be experienced on a computer for it was never meant to

be so.

The app is a preparatory help to the experience and was never intended to be the experience itself. I feel it is a very good aid, especially for those who have been away from the sacrament for a long time and wondered what changes have occurred since they last celebrated the sacrament. The examination of conscience is good for all of us before we enter the experience of reconciliation.

The Rev. Richard Albarano

St. Francis Xavier Catholic Church

Burbank

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As a Protestant, I can't say I'm all that excited about being able to go to confession online. True, confession is good for the soul, and as I understand the faith, we never outgrow our need to repent. But, gee whiz: on a computer?

I'm glad that church leaders were quick to point out that confessing to a machine does not obviate the need for confessing in person to a person (priest), but if one must still confess the old fashioned way, why the new app?

St. Paul says someplace in the New Testament that all things are lawful, but not all things are helpful. I think this confession app is a good example of what the apostle meant.

The Rev. C. L. "Skip" Lindeman

La Cañada Congregational Church

La Cañada

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If leaders in the Catholic Church approved this app, then I guess it is a good idea for their religious objectives. However, I personally feel that replacing a central, interpersonal ritual with a faceless, robotic computer program is not necessarily wise.

I strongly support using technological advances to aid spiritual causes and spread religious teaching, which is why I've been at the forefront of encouraging the development of Jewish websites, computer programs and phone applications. Longtime readers of this column are familiar with my involvement in the Chabad-sponsored website AskMoses.com, which offers visitors access to an extensive database of Jewish knowledge and the opportunity to have live, anonymous chats with religious scholars 24 hours a day, 6 days a week. There is no question that the Internet, smart phones, social networking and other communications technologies have provided spiritual organizations with a plethora of powerful tools to aid those seeking divine inspiration.

At the same time, however, there is a hazardous side to all this progress. When a person becomes heavily reliant on technology instead of humans for spiritual (or any other) guidance, then detachment and remoteness can become a real threat to his or her mental well-being.

Humans are meant to interact with one another. When this key component of life is missing, it can lead to negative results.

I therefore urge religious organizations to provide their followers with all sorts of technological aids — including smart-phone apps — that can enhance religious life and deliver new, exciting methods of spiritual improvement. But great care is required to ensure that these programs simply support the religious experience, rather than replace the personal, human dimension which is so critical to positive spiritual growth.

Rabbi Simcha Backman

Chabad Jewish Center

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