



# ‘Signs of the times’: confession and the semiotic production of inner truth

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How is it that confession – a highly ritualized, dialogically structured speech act – appears to transparently reflect and reveal the inner states of confessants? This article explores this question by closely engaging select post-Vatican II defences of the Sacrament of Penance, which lay out the requirements of ‘modern’ confession in striking detail. A close reading of these theological texts demonstrates that felicitous confession is the product of three correlated (meta-)semiotic processes: (1) the figuration of the penitent memory as a storehouse for sin; (2) the management of ritual time into discrete stages of ‘private’ meaning-making and ‘public’ pronouncement; and (3) the erasure of the social scenery of the confessional utterance. In concert, these processes render indexical signs as iconic ones and, in so doing, naturalize confession as the cathartic revelation of inner truths, already constituted as such.

Writing in the wake of the Second Vatican Council (1962-5), Dutch theologian F.J. Heggen reluctantly concedes that confession is an anachronistic practice, ill suited to the spiritual demands of the modern-day penitent:

For centuries confession was an instrument of guidance in the first place and in undesirable cases an instrument of control [and] it is not to be wondered at that in our society this confessional practice is being accepted only with ever-increasing difficulty. It made the priest into a judge and the penitent into a humbled person who, in fear of severe judgment, had to reveal great pieces of his intimate life to the priest. This is something which modern man will more and more resist (1967: 44-5).

In line with Heggen’s prognosis, a statistical decline in the practice of Catholic confession since the mid-1960s is well documented. Despite liturgical reforms instituted in 1973 that de-emphasized the juridical function of the priest, by the mid-1980s many confessional boxes throughout Europe and North America stood vacant (Haliczzer 1996; Sykes 1985).

Certainly, the Second Vatican Council’s agenda of *aggiornamento* (or the updating of the Church) – premised as it was on attuning the Church to, drawing in, and democratizing relationships with a ‘modern’ laity (Heggen 1967) – rendered the juridical features of confessional practice a significant theological concern. This, indeed, is the

basis of Heggen's worry above, dedicated as he was to sustaining confessional practice during a period when would-be confessants were primed to 'resist' what they regarded as an 'instrument of control'. Accordingly, Heggen joined other theologians across Europe and the United States in writing defences of the Sacrament, which details the recipe for a spiritually and psychologically cathartic, rather than politically oppressive, confessional experience. This was their way of heeding Pope John XXIII's call to read and respond to the 'signs of the times': that is, to reconcile the Church's teachings with contemporary social issues and actors.<sup>1</sup>

One can imagine that the timely sign of particular note to these theologians was the striking secularization of confession. Indeed, considering the decline of sacral confession since the 1960s, the contemporaneous proliferation of confessional practice into the far reaches of the 'profane' is all the more striking. Perhaps most prominently, the post-war growth of psychological imaginaries and institutions has provided confession a welcome home. Accordingly, many have followed Foucault (1978) in identifying confession as the exemplar of a modern, clinical commerce that defines disease as the denial of truth and relief as its articulation (e.g. Alcoff & Gray 1993; Rapping 1996; Rose 1990; Young 1994). On the legal front, confession has found new purpose as well. For instance, as some legal scholars have argued (Brooks 1998; 2000; Shuy 1998), the US Supreme Court's 1966 *Miranda* ruling, which grants suspects a 'right to remain silent', works to assure that suspects' confessions are motivated by internal rather than external force. Social movements also court the confessant, as feminists (e.g. Bernstein 1992; Gilmore 1994) and community activists (e.g. Serrano-Garcia & Bond 1994; Westerman 1998) explicitly advocate for confession as the quintessential expression of fully realized American personhood liberated from the grips of a self-suffocating society. Television talk shows elicit detailed if especially vulgar confessions, satisfying audiences with stagings of confessants' self-realizations (see Lofton 2011; Lowney 1999) and providing caricatured evidence that 'Western man has become a confessing animal' (Foucault 1978: 59). So while Heggen and his colleagues bemoan the decline of the confessional and worry that, in its absence, Catholic guilt 'finds no escape' (Heggen 1967: 18), confession in clinics, courtrooms, and social movements seemingly provides the escape route for our most personal and powerful truths.

Although anthropologists may find Foucault's formulation of Western man-as-confessing animal suspiciously broad, we should nevertheless appreciate that the confessions of Catholics, criminals, and consumers of psychotherapy are united by an ideological effect: they seem to release an already existing inner state of the confessant into words. Whether elicited by police interrogators, talk show hosts, self-help groups, or post Vatican II confessors, confession is no longer understood or engaged as a power-laden dialogical routine, but rather as an act of liberation *qua* monological self-expression. To be sure, simply to respond to moral interrogation is to render one's confession, effectively, inert. So, contrary to Heggen's worries about 'boxing in' confessants, contemporary confessions are now commonly understood to be automatic outward reflections of reflexively realized inwardness.<sup>2</sup>

With precisely these effects in mind, Foucault (1978; 1988; 1993; 1999a; 1999b; 2001; 2005) famously argued that confession is a 'ritual of discourse' central to the making of the modern, Western subject. However, interestingly, Foucault's earliest writings on confession primarily focused on its extra-discursive elements, with particular interest in its proponents and social functions. As potent illustration of his power/knowledge thesis, he emphasized the insidious work of confession, which in pulling power through

the subject establishes an interiority that accounts for itself in thoroughly institutionalized terms. Suggesting the predictable nature of this ‘play of dominations’ (1984: 83), Foucault once provocatively claimed of confession that ‘[o]ne could plot a line going straight from the seventeenth-century pastoral to what became its projection in literature’ (1978: 21).

Of course, the study of confession across cultural and historical contexts powerfully challenges this claim by demonstrating that the dynamics of confession as a social event, and the roles played by confessor and confessant, have hardly remained constant (cf. Engelke 2007; Harris 2006; Kratz 1991; Mosse 2006; Myers 1996; Rafael 1993; Robbins 2004; 2008; Rumsey 2008; Schieffelin 2007; 2008; Senior 1994). Furthermore, ethnographies of confession reveal that the myriad speech acts locally recognized as confession are not scripted, at least in the sense of faithful social enactments of an already meaningful textual reserve. Thus, a felicitous confession is not primarily a matter of *what* is said *where*, or even, arguably, *to whom*. Rather, as I elaborate below, the denotational content of confession-as-text and the social arrangement of confession-as-event can vary dramatically – and still count as the stuff of confession – precisely because the *semiotic programme* of confession remains relatively constant. What is more, these semiotic regularities shape, from the outset, who we can confess ourselves to be.

This line of argumentation in some ways resembles Foucault’s later formulation of confession, especially as articulated in his Collège de France and Dartmouth lectures. In this work, Foucault’s focus shifts from the social dynamics of subjugation, wherein the confessant is regulated at the hands of the confessor via the demand that the repressed be verbally revealed, to the elaboration of confession as an ethical project of self-formation. More importantly for the purposes of this article, he invests in an analysis of confession as a discursive event, whose efficacy relies on the ritual management of the confessant’s speech. As Judith Butler characterizes Foucault’s latter work,

The role of the confessor within pastoral power is no longer understood primarily as governed by the desire to enhance his own power but to facilitate a transition or conversion *through the process of verbalization*, one that opens the self to interpretation and, in effect, to a different kind of self-making in the wake of sacrifice (2004: 164, my emphasis).

Interested precisely in this ‘process of verbalization’, this essay shares Foucault’s premise – as articulated in *The hermeneutics of the subject* (2005) – that in order to understand confessants’ speech, we must investigate the discourse of confessors. More specifically, Foucault explains that the confessional process is guided by rules that ‘are necessary of the master’s side, rules that once again do not focus on the truth of discourse, but on the *way in which this discourse of truth is formulated*’ (2005: 368, my emphasis). Yet whereas Foucault mainly focuses on the conventional histories of these rules with attention to the moral obligations and sequelae of their enactment, I work to illuminate the meta-linguistic nature of the rules of confession, which predictably calibrate *what* can be said *when*. My broader point is that any intelligible ‘process of verbalization’, especially highly genred ones, operates in accordance with specifiable semiotic imperatives that set the very terms of intelligibility. In the case of confession, the meta-linguistic management of space and time plays an especially important role.

Accordingly, in working with post-Vatican II defences of confessional practice (Heggen 1967; Snoeck 1964; von Speyr 1964), this article explores the question: *what discursive requirements must be met for speech acts to be recognized as transparent*

*reflections of the inner states of speakers?* Although one might pursue this question on any number of ethnohistorical grounds, these theological texts are especially revealing in that they specify a modern recipe for confession-as-self-revelation. Under pressure to address would-be confessants, and explain to them the value of the Sacrament in terms they can understand and appreciate, these theologians not only downplay potentially offensive power dynamics and gloss confession in culturally resonant psychological terms; they also lay out, in explicitly meta-linguistic terms, precisely what constitutes a felicitous and – by extension – cathartic confession.

Based on a close reading of these theological texts, I demonstrate that the felicitous confession is a product of three interrelated processes: (1) the figuration of the penitent memory as a storehouse for sin; (2) the management of ritual time into discrete stages of 'private' meaning-making and 'public' pronouncement; and (3) the erasure of the social scenery of the confessional utterance. Through this semiotic programme, contextual, time-reckoned indexical signs are essentialized as iconic ones. And once sin is rendered an icon of the confessant's inner state, the confession appears to be an unmediated act of self-revelation. In elaborating this argument, this essay contends that confession can constitute and regulate selves only when and if the 'process of verbalization' unfolds in precisely this way.

#### **'Moving indoors': a brief history of sacral confession through Vatican II**

While profane confessions seem to grow more and more public – as tell-all talk shows attest – the history of sacral confession is one of ever-increasing privatization. As W. David Myers notes, 'To some degree, the entire history of penance until the late twentieth century has been a matter of "moving indoors" and away from public pressure' (1996: 7). Indeed, transgressors in the early Church were required to confess in front of the congregation, enlisting them in reconciliation.<sup>3</sup> Such public performances began to decline in the sixth century with the advent of penitentials – manuals that both classified sins and assigned to each a properly penitent response. By the ninth century, these confession manuals had effectively helped to decentralize, proliferate, and privatize confessional practices as local priests, armed now with the rules and regulations of penance, joined the bishop in the rank of confessor. Confessants now relayed their confessions in relative privacy.

Although the penitentials were gradually abandoned, local confessors not only managed to retain their autonomy, but also saw their authority solidified in 1215 by the Fourth Lateran Council and reaffirmed in 1551 by the Council of Trent.<sup>4</sup> Establishing auricular confession as one of the seven sacraments and prohibiting the ordeal (i.e. rituals meant to determine guilt or innocence through potentially injurious physical tests and trials), the Council decreed that Christians confess at least once a year before a parish priest and, in so doing, officially rendered penance a matter of speech.<sup>5</sup> In this sense, the Council's decree signalled a significant shift: trial by ordeal represented an epistemology of *sight* as the penitent's guilt was evident in the scars left by divine hand. And while forms of physical torture continued after auricular confession was instituted, pain was applied only in order to ascertain the verbal confession (Asad 1993: 92; see also Brooks 2000: 93).

Thus, the shift to confessional penance meant that truth was to be gleaned from the voice rather than read off the body. By the sixteenth century, the ritual of penance entailed a verbal recounting of all sinful thoughts, as well as their frequency and circumstances (Myers 1996). As confessional practices further evolved, a good confession meant not simply detailing deeds and desires, but also declaring 'aloud and

intelligibly the truth about oneself' (Foucault 1993: 201). And, as the Sacrament of Penance shifted the official site of truth from the body to the voice, new burdens of proof arose. Unlike the scars of ordeal, words – in complicity with a sinful will – could evade, manipulate, and prevaricate (Asad 1993: 93). Accordingly, the advent of auricular practices was accompanied by a significant enhancement of Church officials' juridical authority (Bossy 1975; Lea 1968 [1869]; Tentler 1977). Inquisitorial procedures allowed priests to interrogate with penetrative depth and exquisite detail in their stringent search for the truth. 'Who, what, where, with what accomplices, why, in what manner, when' was the standard mnemonic formula after Lateran IV, indicating the ambitious reach of the confessor's inquisition (Brooks 2000: 99). As great historian of confession Henry Charles Lea writes, 'No loophole was to be left through which the penitent could escape the searching inquisition' (1968 [1869]: 370). Thus, the confessor served as both director and evaluator, confirming or denying the veracity of the penitent's words, and granting grace accordingly (Asad 1993; see also Haliczzer 1996).<sup>6</sup>

These rigorous, inquisitorial procedures are precisely what post-Vatican II theological descriptions of confessional practice work to revise, or at least recast. To update the Church, Vatican II's proponents insisted, was to engage with a post-war public wary of bald displays of authoritarian power. In this light, Heggen tellingly describes the confessional as the appropriate site for the 'reception' rather than the elicitation of signs:

Preparation for the reception of [confession] consists very often in a sort of searching through one's conscience, all too often with a catalogue of sins in hand. But no-one gets to know himself by tracing how often he has *done* this or that, if he does not ask himself what the deed he considers as sinful or as virtuous actually means in his life; why he behaves in such a way, in what direction he is going by acting thus (1967: 18, emphasis in the original).

Prescribing an internal inquisition – one that probes for deep reasons and entwined meaning – Heggen sounds as much a psychoanalyst as a theological anthropologist.<sup>7</sup> In quest for self-knowledge, the confessant is asked to read herself not as a simple 'catalogue' of sinful deeds, but rather as an arcane text filled with meanings and motives to discover and decipher. For Heggen, the sinful self is not easily perusable, calling for an intensive interrogation. Yet, significantly, all the necessary questions are posed both *by* the self and *to* the self, before encountering an inquiring, authoritative other.<sup>8</sup>

In reference to this internalized dialogue, Foucault asks, 'Why is confession able to assume this hermeneutical role?' (1988: 47). He finds his answer in the dynamics of governmentality: '[C]onfession permits the master to know because of his greater experience and wisdom and therefore to give better advice. Even if the master, in his role as a discriminating power, doesn't say anything, the fact that the thought has been expressed will have an effect of discrimination' (1988: 47). For Foucault it is the master's silence that indicates the operation of a new form of power.<sup>9</sup> Characterized by the 'disappearance of the dialectical structure' (1988: 33), Foucault's confession can operate without the master actually rendering his 'better advice' precisely because his discriminating response has already been integrated into the confessant's entreaty.

To be sure, what is most striking about contemporary confession is the way that it obscures the intensive interaction of confessor and confessant, funnelling their dialogue into what appears a monological report derived from the depths of the sinner. Along these lines, another Vatican II defender of the Sacrament – Swiss theologian Adrienne von Speyr – provides ample evidence of the kind of confessional government that Foucault describes:

Most people are incapable of analysing their own way of life. They need to discuss it with another and look for someone, not so much to hear his views as to have the chance of expressing exactly what troubles them; more especially, perhaps, to strengthen their own opinion by the reasons they adduce (1964: 11).

Pointing to confessants' limited capacity to analyse themselves, von Speyr suggests that there is ample 'need' for dialogical interaction if the confessant hopes to find reason. However, she carefully qualifies that needed reason comes not in the sage response of the sought-out confessor – who now sits silently as a curiously inert set of ears – but instead in confessants' expression of 'exactly what troubles them'. For von Speyr (as for Foucault), the unknowing sinner comes to know herself by listening to herself as hermeneut of herself.

Yet while von Speyr's positive analysis seems to fall into line with Foucault's genealogy, her notes give new and important clues as to how the dialectical structure of confession manages to 'disappear'. According to von Speyr, the confessor's active participation – as director or evaluator – is rendered inconsequential if and when the confessant engages in the 'exact expression' of her own troubles. As we will see, this exactitude is achieved through a prescribed *intratextual* process that necessarily precedes the *interactive* encounter of confessor and confessant. It is through this *a priori* process that confessional utterances are rendered discrete icons of personal sin rather than as indices of a loaded ritual situation. For if confession has 'moved indoors' – as Myers suggests above – it also has moved inside the confessant and away from the worldliness of language-in-use, including its dialogical features.

### Confession as inner reference: towards a semiotic account

While many scholars have noted that confession is very much in line with the inward-looking epistemology that pervaded modern European Christianity (e.g. Bossy 1975; Myers 1996; Senior 1994; cf. de Boer 2001), it is also strikingly consistent with dominant Euro-American ideas and beliefs about language (i.e. *language ideology*) that suggest that words primarily function to name pre-existing objects (Silverstein 1996; Woolard 1998).<sup>10</sup> As a referential speech act, confession putatively enables the naming of already existing truths – particularly 'inner' truths. In this sense, confession exemplifies the *ideology of inner reference*, an ideology that purports that (a) language's primary function is to refer to pre-existing phenomena, and (b) the phenomena to which it refers are internal to speakers (Carr 2006; 2010a; 2010b). According to the ideology of inner reference, language works because the radical split between signified and signifier is bridged by the process of signification as speakers match words with discrete, pre-existent, inner meanings.

Indeed, to the extent that speakers think that their words express underlying, private realities that they call 'meanings', the expression of truth seems a matter of matching. As von Speyr's emphasis on *exact* expression indicates, confession is consistent with the norm of sincerity of speech, as Webb Keane describes it:

The concept of sincerity ... seems to assume a clear distinction between words and thought, as parallel discourses (interior and exterior) such that they either could or could not match up. Should they indeed match up, language would thereby become transparent, nothing significant would remain of the material forms or social origins of words, allowing the unmediated thought to reveal itself. Moreover, as a linguistic ideology, the concept of sincerity also seeks the authority of words in that relationship of matching (2002: 72).

In the context of confession, this linguistic ideology promises its adherents a seductive payoff: to the extent that a confession successfully refers to inner states, it also cleanses the conscience of them. Arguably, by linking the power to transform with the ability to refer, confession produces what it claims to reveal: the inner truths of the conscience as well as the penitent who can be denied, saved, and converted in their very utterance. Furthermore, as a diverse array of cultural commentators have affirmed, confession performs and produces *precisely because* it appears to refer and reveal.<sup>11</sup>

Though language ideology certainly guides linguistic practice, and – by extension – ritual practice, Keane's passage above raises the question of the semiotic processes that align spoken signs and inner states. What glues a confessional utterance together as a text, allowing words not just to point to (or index) inner states, but also to stand for (or iconize) them? How, in the case of confession, do the pesky social indices of speech manage to disappear?

As I demonstrate below, confession works as a mode of inner reference precisely because it formally dissociates itself from the 'act', along with the mediating problems of social interaction, cultural convention, and historical context that any speech act necessarily entails. In this sense, the felicitous confession constitutes a rather exemplary case of *indexical iconicity*: the mobilization of a set of time-reckoned indexical gestures to a presupposable and reified 'here and now' (Silverstein 1998; 2003; 2004) – that is, the sinful subject isolated from her social surrounds. So if 'the words [of the auricular] were not identical with the truth, in the way that the bodily marks of someone who had submitted to the ordeal were identical with it' (Asad 1993: 93), modern confession nevertheless strives for the same kind of iconicity that the scars of the ordeal enjoyed.

### Storing si(g)ns and the grounds of inner reference

If confession is to be a totally sincere expression, as Heggen and von Speyr insist it must be, the penitent's spoken signifiers need stable ground where they can locate their 'matching' signifieds. St Augustine's *Confessions*, written centuries before the establishment of the auricular, provides this ground. Whether or not Augustine was responsible for the 'invention of the inner self', as Phillip Cary (2000) claims, his formulation of a storehouse-like memory and his delineation of the representational capacities of human speech arguably laid the necessary foundation for the ideology of inner reference.<sup>12</sup>

In Book Ten of the *Confessions*, Augustine elaborates on his portrait of a vast memory that can contain experience as thing-like ideas. Suggesting that he distinguishes the aroma of violets from that of lilies not so much because he actively smells them in one instant, but because he can recollect them in the next, Augustine writes:

These actions are inward, in the vast hall of my memory. There sky, land, and sea are available to me together with all the sensations I have been able to experience in them, except for those which I have forgotten. There also I meet myself and recall what I am, what I have done, and when and where and how I was affected when I did it (1991: 186–7).

Here, Augustine introduces the possibility of semantic replication: sky, land, and sea are available to the rememberer if he ventures inward, to retrieve them from the 'vast hall' of memory. And whereas the act of remembering is far from perfect, as some experiences are 'so remote and pushed into the background, as if in most secret taverns' (1991: 189), the metaphysical status of what is remembered is never in question. Accordingly, Augustine notes that while words – such as 'sea' and 'violet' – merely 'pass through the air as a noise' and disappear, we 'hold in memory not their images but their realities' (1991: 188).

Furthermore, the sky that Augustine finds in his memory is not simply an inner replication of an outward reality; his remembered sky is loaded with 'all the sensations [he has] been able to experience in [it]'. Thus, Augustine promises that if I cannot encounter sky itself in my memory, I can find the next best thing: an iconic recapitulation (i.e. 'sky') in all its fullness. And although one may temporarily fail to extol the smell of lilies or the taste of sweet wine, the experiences of smelling and tasting remain insulated from the vicissitudes of time and space, for – as Augustine puts it – 'I entrusted them to my mind as if storing them up to be produced when required' (1991: 189):

Of course, confession is not primarily interested in the aroma of violets, but instead is focused on the referents of sin. And if the vastness of the Augustinian memory were not daunting enough, the penitent is also confronted with a mess when entering her storehouse. Augustine's anti-Pelagian writings emphasized the disordering force of sin, an idea now well established in Christian theology (see Connolly 2002; Niebuhr 1949). Considering both the vastness and the disorder of the penitent memory, retrieving inner referents is not just a matter of locating them, but involves sorting and ordering them, too. Augustine writes,

[B]y thinking we, as it were, gather ideas together which the memory contains in a dispersed and disordered way, and by concentrating our attention we arrange them in order as if ready to hand, stored in the very memory where previously they lay hidden, scattered and neglected. Now, they easily come forward under the direction of the mind familiar with them (1991: 189).

Here, Augustine anticipates the first step of a now well-established confessional discipline in which the once dispersed contents of memory are rendered thing-like, so that they can be 'arranged in order' and ultimately brought forward as spoken signs.<sup>13</sup> Indeed, according to Augustine, the outward articulation of inner referents is easy and almost automatic *when and if* the proper concentration has been devoted to their arrangement. As one of Heggen's interlocutors, Andreas Snoeck, pithily advises, '[A]n examination of conscience is needed in order to situate the sin committed' (1964: 18) – a statement that will be elaborated in following section.

Here, it is important to underscore that without Augustine's vision of memory as inner sanctum and iconic representation, the articulation of sin or sign could hardly be considered 'easy'. As the writings of post-Vatican II theologians demonstrate, the modern programme of confessional semiotics sets forth from the epistemic grounds laid by an ancient saint.

### **The ritual organization of confessional time**

As Snoeck indicates above, the signs of sin should be formulated and situated in the conscience rather than in the confessional booth. It follows that correct confessional practice begins well before the confessant meets her confessor. In fact, the process of identifying, sorting through, and deciphering the contents of the penitent memory, known as the *examen*, has long been considered the necessary first step in confessional practice.<sup>14</sup> By the thirteenth century, the confessant was 'required to undergo the salutary self-discipline of scrutinizing his conscience, reviewing his acts, his desires and his passions, laying them all at the feet of a ghostly counsellor' (Lea 1968 [1869]: 413) before he entered the confessional. The *examen* was of continued importance in Counter-Reformation Germany, where, as Myers notes, felicitous confessions required adequate self-examination before the oral pronouncement of results: 'In church, the

penitent should spend some time before coming to the confessional. Those who simply rushed in were likely to have spent little time examining their consciences' (1996: 180). Similarly, Vicente Rafael tells of Spanish colonial missionaries' warnings to Tagalog-speaking 'converts' that 'even before repentance can be enacted and voiced ... one must actively search through one's memories to recall one's sins' (1993: 97).<sup>15</sup> And even as they tried to attract wary and resistant confessants, Heggen and his contemporaries continued to prioritize a rigorous and disciplined *examen* (e.g. Heggen 1967: 18, 112-13; Snoeck 1964: 16-17, 20; von Speyr 1964: 107-8).

Although sin is most readily defined as wilfully evil, individual acts that are offensive to divine order (Haliczer 1996: 7), the *examen* seeks sin as a complex cluster of qualities: thoughts, desires, and intentions that presumably accompany more readily demonstrable acts. Foucault accordingly notes that the confessor is more likely concerned with the 'nature, the quality, the substance of [the confessant's] thoughts' (1993: 217; also see Asad 1993: 119) than with empirical actions. Considering the complex scope of sin, it is hardly surprising that confessional manuals describe the *examen* as an exacting process – one of casting a finely woven net over the penitent conscience in order to capture even the most furtive inner truths.

Furthermore, because the sin is characterized by temporal as well as qualitative scope, to examine the penitent conscience means to identify all sins committed since one's last confession. After all, sinful acts are the putative sequelae of sordid motivations, intentions, and inclinations, and may themselves precipitate a whole new round of the same. So confession not only demands that sins be identified in the order they unfolded, but also requires that their casual ordering be plumbed in its entirety. The *examen*, therefore, must provide a way simultaneously to manage the temporal and qualitative breadth of individual sinfulness. Heggen elaborates:

... I consider that every adult should reflect upon his fundamental attitude and actual plan of life regularly indulging in an examination of conscience, in which he should try to trace the background and motives of his actions. It is obvious that the *object of this reflection will be constituted by various spheres of life* which the person in question enters. It would seem advisable to include the conclusions of such a searching of conscience in one's confessions (1967: 113, my emphasis).

Here, the qualitative reach of the proper *examen* is readily evident. The penitent is not only asked to reflect upon the 'various spheres of life' into which he enters, but also urged to connect these movements with his 'fundamental attitude' and 'actual plan of life'. Just as Foucault claimed that the confessant 'must ... scrutinize [his] thoughts as subjective data which have to be interpreted, which have to be scrutinized, in their roots and origins' (1993: 218), Heggen advises that the penitent must 'try to trace the background and motives of his actions'.

However, Heggen insists not only that the confessant search back through the memory for its sinful content, but also that this content is brought forward in a very particular way. Indeed, a distinctive temporality characterizes Heggen's counsel, one that draws out confessants' actions in detailed sequence only to collapse them as discretely confessable sin. More specifically, from her 'various spheres of life', the confessant is to assemble causally correlated clusters of 'background', 'motives', and 'actions' as the 'object of th[e] reflection'. If successful, Heggen suggests, the *examen* results in a *constituted object*, an object upon which the penitent is to reflect, and an object that, ultimately, can be relayed in discrete, verbal 'conclusions'.

Thus, the *examen* manages individual sin by marshalling the messy contents of the penitent conscience (e.g. 'actions', 'plans', 'motives') into a tidy semiotic bundle that can be matched with and released into spoken signs. In this sense, the *examen* is indebted to an Augustinian discipline which suggests that in order to examine one's conscience, its contents 'have to be brought together (*cogenda*) so as to be capable of being known; that means they have to be gathered (*colligenda*) from their dispersed state' (Augustine 1991: 189). In other words, the *examen* involves essentializing indexical signs – construed from the dynamics of worldly action – as timeless icons of inner states.

Now consider the way the *examen* works to anticipate and control the circumstances in which these constituted signs are introduced in actual ritual time: Heggen advises that the confessant approach the confessional with the 'conclusions of such a searching of conscience' already in hand. The ideological consequences of this temporal ordering are fairly obvious: if the *examen* allows the confessant to reach 'conclusions' before he reaches the confessional, his spoken confession appears uninflected by the ensuing interaction with his confessor. It follows that an incomplete or faulty confession can be squarely blamed on the insincere confessant.

Although numerous commentators have critically noted that the confessant interiorizes the confessor's demands, it is important to appreciate that the 'disappearance' of the confessor and the internalization of his inquiries is an *ideological effect of a set of semiotic imperatives* as well as a sociological dynamic. First, the temporal organization of the confessional ritual – which demands self-examination before self-disclosure – creates the effect that sin has been denoted as such prior to engagement with one's confessor, and is therefore uninflected by the loaded circumstances of actual utterance. That is, the confessional act 'presupposes a prior event of diagnosis' (Hanks 1996: 190). Yet if confessional words appear to be transparent reflections of the sinning confessant rather than indices of the confessor's interrogation, it is because this 'prior event' involves a second kind of temporalization. As an intensive exercise in iconization, the *examen* collapses the spatio-temporal properties of signs so that they appear to be context-independent.

### The conscience as confessional box

At the outset of this essay, we noted Heggen's expressed concern that 'modern man' will resist confession as long as he understands it to be an exercise of the confessor's power rather than an opportunity to cleanse his conscience. As we saw in the preceding section, Heggen resolves this problem by establishing the conscience as the primary locale of confessional practice. This leaves open the question of how to manage the power-laden dynamics of the confessional *utterance*, as a speech event and an interactional context. In this regard, Andreas Snoeck picks up where Heggen leaves off, offering this strikingly decontextualized portrayal of

the confessional, where man, separated from his usual surroundings, can really enter into his own conscience – even though our consideration of the jurisdictional aspect of Confession indicated an important social background, of which, however, the penitent is usually no longer aware ... Gradually, and without restraint, the penitent reveals to his confessor everything that precedes the actual positing of his free actions. No one can doubt the psychohygienic power of Confession, at least for the well-balanced penitent (1964: 57-8).

Whereas Heggen carefully delineates two discrete stages of confessional practice – the inner constitution of signs in the conscience and the verbal release of those signs in the confessional – Snoeck extends the metaphysical work of the *examen* into the physical

context of the confessional. Indeed, note how Snoeck's ideal confessant 'enters into his conscience' and approaches the confessional box at one and the same moment, almost as if there were no ontological distinction between the two.

Nevertheless, both theologians proffer the very same confessional chronotope (Bahktin 1981): that is, the spatial and temporal configuration of confession as culturally recognizable practice and 'place'. Namely, by establishing the conscience as a ritual site in its own right, a spatio-temporality of thought is construed so that the spatio-temporality of speech can be collapsed.<sup>16</sup> For as long as the work of signifying sin is confined to a storehouse-like conscience, the situated dynamics of the confessional utterance, along with its 'jurisdictional aspects', can be relegated to what Snoeck calls 'the social background'.

Indeed, Snoeck's recipe for felicitous confessional speech requires not only that the confessant be separated from his 'usual surroundings', but also that he is uninfluenced by his *immediate* surroundings in crafting his confession. After all, recognition of the social indexicality of the confessional speech act interrupts the project of pure inner revelation. It follows that once the mediating effects of the confessional as a speech situation are obscured, confessants seem to channel already constituted inner states when they speak. In this way, confession can 'bring into this spatiotemporal envelope or interactional context the longed-for reality of authoritative soothing ... [F]iguratively speaking, one's inhabiting a "severed" social condition leads inevitably ... to one's reinhabiting a resumptively "regenerated" one' (Silverstein 2004: 627).

What of those who 'inhabit' the potent ritual chronotope laid out by post-Vatican II theological texts? Notably, to be a 'well-balanced penitent' in Snoeck's terms is to be *unaware* of the myriad ways the circumstances of speaking affect what is said – a rendering that recalls the Foucauldian confessant who does not recognize his confession to be the product of power's penetration. Indeed it seems that 'modern man' has been much more likely to unrestrainedly 'reveal to his confessor everything that precedes the actual positing of his free actions' (Snoeck 1964: 57-8) than to resist 'reveal[ing] great pieces of his intimate life to the priest' (Heggen 1967: 44-5).

To this point, Vatican II defenders of the Sacrament of Penance demonstrate that confession derives its 'psychohygienic power' from the conversion of indexical signs into iconic ones. After all, once meaningful signs are essentialized as things stored in the spiritual psyche – or what I have called an icon of an inner state – their verbal release may indeed feel cathartic. Doubtlessly, this is particularly true when they are signs of sin, as I elaborate below. Here, it is important to stress that if following the now well-established recipe for felicitous confession, the confessional utterance ejects an exterior-made-interior, generating the potent effect of a cleansed subjectivity.<sup>17</sup>

### Simply speaking si(g)ns

Since Augustine, Christian doctrine casts sin as a matter of human will. Accordingly, the *examen* is marked as a highly intentional process, requiring the sinner's directed energies in sorting through and ordering her wilful misdeeds. Although the *examen* elicits the will of the confessant, the confessional utterance is idealized as will-less. As Heggen notes, 'It is not easy to search one's heart, lay bare one's intentions. But it is without doubt necessary in order for us to see, in some real measure, who we in fact are' (1967: 19). Though Heggen characterizes the task of both interpretation (or 'searching') and revelation (or 'laying bare') as difficult, the intentionality implied in the former process works to assure the latter appears to be relatively automatic.

However, as Vatican II theologians sometimes concede, speaking si(g)ns is not always so simple. For instance, von Speyr warns of the ways that human and divine will can interfere with the confessional utterance:

It may happen that, in the course of confessing, one loses the thread, forgets details, the things come out in a different order or in none at all; or something incidental suddenly seems important, because, perhaps, one feels overwrought or else because the Holy Ghost wills a certain feature to be emphasized (1964: 108).

Note that even in her account of a dubious confession, 'the things' of the conscience are not only constituted, but are also ordered before one engages in the actual 'course of confessing'. Indeed, throughout her writings, von Speyr – like her colleagues – emphasizes the *a priori* duty to establish the contents of the conscience before one reaches the confessional. But here von Speyr acknowledges the troubling 'incidental(s)' that arise in one's situated engagement with one's confessor and interfere with the pure verbal channelling of inner referents. If 'one loses the thread' that links sins and signs, the things of the conscience fail to 'come out' in the 'order' and 'detail' established through the preceding *examen*.

To resolve the problem of the sociality of speech, von Speyr underscores the 'duty' to pure inner reference regardless of how distracting the social indices of speech might be:

None the less, one must know there is a duty to obedience of the actual ordering of confession, adhere to the matter in hand, and not try to force oneself to express things otherwise than they appear, nor insist unduly on any particular matter. Each sin must be called by its proper name, without exaggeration on one side or another (1964: 108).

Note that, for von Speyr, the dutiful confessant does not 'obey' the confessor, but rather 'adhere[s] to the matter at hand', allowing 'things' of her conscience to find the names that match their appearance. The only 'force' that should be in operation is a semantico-referential one: each sin, having already found its 'proper name' in the course of self-examination, now simply waits to be 'called'.

As von Speyr's negative allusion to 'exaggeration' suggests, confessors are alert to the whims of the resistant or distracted confessant, who sometimes strays from the work of cleanly denoting inner referents. In warning against verbal excess 'on one side or the other', von Speyr demonstrates an unwillingness to recognize the dynamics of sin as an institutionally and interactively mediated, if not constituted, entity. Indeed, regardless of their sensitivity to the 'signs of the times' and social circumstances of 'modern man' (Heggen 1967: 44-5), Vatican II defenders of the Sacrament offer a meta-semiotic recipe that assures that confession cannot point to social scenery at all. By figuring the penitent memory as a storehouse for sin, dividing ritual time into discrete stages of 'private' meaning-making and 'public' pronouncement, and erasing the indexicality of confession as a meaning-making process, the confession is essentialized as nothing more nor less than the iconic representation of the confessant's inner state, already constituted as such. It is in this light, no doubt, that Mikhail Bakhtin deems confession a discourse 'which is from the outset consciously non-artistic' (1990: 148).

### **Conclusions: the performativity of confessional reference**

In 'The author and the hero in aesthetic activity', Bakhtin (1990) proposes an analytical approach to the study of confession that radically diverges from, and thereby works to undermine, the semiotic programme of inner reference. According to Bakhtin:

[A] confession will present itself to us as raw material for possible aesthetic treatment – as a possible content of a possible work of art (in the most immediate form, a biographical artifact). In reading a confession with our own eyes, we introduce thereby our axiological position of being situated outside the subjectum of confessional self-accounting; along with all the possibilities associated with that position ... : we import a consummating significance to its ending as well as to other constituents (for we are temporally outside); we provide it with a background (we perceive it in the context of a determinate historical period and a determinate historical setting, if those are known to us, or we simply perceive it against the background of what is more familiar to us): we situate certain moments of its accomplishment within an encompassing space, and so forth. All these features of its ‘excess’ introduced by our perception provide a basis for constituting the aesthetically finished form of a work (1990: 148).

Here, Bakhtin asks analysts to decipher the spatio-temporal features that the confessional speech act, as an ostensibly referential self-report, obscures. While Dostoevsky is its immediate target, Bakhtin’s advice is nevertheless consistent with the guidance of linguistic anthropologists who suggest that in order to understand the efficacy of particular speech acts, we must delineate the semiotic processes that sustain the language ideologies in which they are grounded. Accordingly, this essay has sought to answer Bakhtin’s call for the re-aestheticization of confession by analytically unpacking its semiotic programme, not in the least because I am interested in its ideological effects.

Looking back into the rich history of confession, it seems that some confessants, themselves, have put such creative analytics to the test. For example, as Rafael (1993) documents, Tagalog confessants strategically ‘misinterpreted’ their Spanish confessors’ demand for complete confessions by disclosing the sins of friends and neighbours, refusing to be interpolated as individual subjects (see also Bossy 1975). Puzzling their confessors with digressions and *non sequiturs*, Tagalog confessions were ‘a bewildering show of the penitent’s verbal dexterity’ (Rafael 1993: 134). Accordingly, the Tagalog term for confession meant to bargain, to haggle, or to use evasions, indicating, perhaps, both a sophisticated understanding of the practice and a canny ability to disrupt its semiotic programme.

Such tactics trouble the dominant Euro-American ideology that claims that language primarily functions as a transparent medium of representation. By shifting the reference-point of the confessional act, Tagalog confessions also disturbed the premises of the ideology of *inner* reference – an ideology that suggests that words can find their referents *inside* speakers. After all, confessing others’ sins suggests the intrinsic connectedness of people, words, and things, and performs – if not denotes – an ethic of mutual responsibility. In this sense, Tagalog confessions throw into stark relief the potential political problems inherent to an ethical practice – and an ideology of language that underscores it – which effectively hinders speakers from pointing to their spatio-temporal surrounds.

As the opening of this essay emphasized, confession sets certain conditions under which people can be recognized and granted full personhood across a number of social terrains. As I have argued, it does so by semiotically generating sin as a discrete referential object, contained inside the heads and hearts of sinners, well before it is expressed to a confessor. This arguably prohibits an articulable sense of the wrongs of the world – poverty, racism, violence, environmental degradation – that clearly exceed the bounds of a single person’s psyche. This is likely what motivates Bakhtin’s call for analysts to introduce colour, plot, form, and movement to what von Speyr dismisses above as the excesses of confession.

In addition to re-aestheticizing confessional practice by showing how confessional words do much more than simply 'match' the inner thoughts of the confessant, our analyses must respect confession's inherent ingenuity for the way it is semiotically, as well as ritually, composed. For as it turns out, the metaphysical isolation of the confessant is not simply a matter of the material conditions imposed by the confessional booth or the pastoral powers of the confessor. Post-Vatican II theological prescriptions for a 'modernized' confessional practice suggest that the confessant, and the inner truth she putatively utters, is an effect of a tightly correlated set of (meta-)semiotic processes. Indeed, if – as Talal Asad purports – modern confession constitutes a 'perfection of discourse' (1993: 121), this perfection should be understood as a semiotic as well as a socio-political achievement.

#### NOTES

For providing valuable feedback on previous versions of this article, I thank Webb Keane, Michael Silverstein, Daniel Listoe, Alan Rumsey, William Garriott, Peter Graif, Julie Chu, Jennifer Cole, Constantine Nakassis, Yvonne Smith, and members of the Anthropology of Christianity Workshop at the University of Chicago. Much gratitude is also owed to Matthew Engelke and the anonymous reviewers he summoned for their acute suggestions during the editorial process. I confess all remaining flaws as my own.

<sup>1</sup> Vatican II put it this way:

The Church has a duty in every age of examining the signs of the times and interpreting them in the light of the gospel, so that it can offer in a manner appropriate to each generation replies to the continual human questioning on the meaning of his life and the life to come and on how they are related. There is a need, then, to be aware of and to understand the world in which we live (*Gaudium et spes* no. 4 as quoted in Maines & McCallion 2007: 121; see Hebblethwaite 1982 on the significance of the Council's *Gaudium et spes* as articulation of Pope John XXIII's agenda).

<sup>2</sup> To identify such transformations is to question whether confessional dynamics have actually changed or whether we, modern confessants, are simply blind to the full range of confession's expression. This essay proceeds from the premise that, across its various scenes of contemporary practice, confession enjoys a semiotic stability that generates misrecognition of its social indices. Whether we confess to cleanse the conscience or to gain absolution, we seem to persist in the belief that confession lets the things *inside* out into words. Crapanzano (1992) argues that this is because our meta-pragmatic language is tethered to the referential, creating a closed hermeneutical system, and here I hope to demonstrate the primary semiotic means by which this 'tethering' occurs.

<sup>3</sup> If the confessed sin was considered a minor one, the public confession generally secured readmittance to the Church. For more serious sins, a period of exclusion – in which the confessant was required to perform elaborate and severe rites of penance – was required (Lea 1968 [1869]).

<sup>4</sup> The Council of Trent, responding to Protestant reformers, strengthened the rituals that Luther criticized. Arguably, the Protestant emphasis on experiential faith continues to account for the ambivalence towards confession as a 'mediated' form of religious speech (see, e.g., Bauman 1983).

<sup>5</sup> Some exceptions are notable. In Catholic confession, written confession is allowable for those who have lost their ability to speak or have an 'insurmountable physical impediment' (see Lea 1968 [1869]). [www.catholic.net](http://www.catholic.net) advises:

If a person whose language the priest does not understand is dying, or is obliged to make his yearly confession, he must tell what he can by signs, show that he is sorry for his sins, and thus receive absolution. In a word, the priest would act with him as he would with one who had lost the use of his speech and power to write. (<http://catholic.net/index.php?option=dedestaca&id=3426&grupo=Church%20Teaching%20QA&canal=Catholicism%20101>, accessed 25 October 2012; also see Myers 1996).

<sup>6</sup> Some scholars suggest that the unequivocal authority of the confessor characterizes legal confession as well, wherein the interlocutor's questions are meant to establish an explicitly coercive interchange, so that the normal dominance of the first position in the pair-part dialogical structure is heightened. Shuy explains, 'Suspects talk, and they appear to do so largely because the bond enforced by the interrogator and the state of dependency' (1998: 41). Interestingly, in his interpretation of *Miranda*-protected confession, Earl Warren

worried that the closed 'interrogation environment is created for no purpose other than to subjugate the individual to the will of his examiner' (as quoted in Brooks 2000: 13).

<sup>7</sup> One might initially argue that, in their defences of confessional practice, Vatican II theologians were simply providing confession with a modern gloss by importing psychological ideas. After all, one of the texts read closely here is entitled *Confession and psychoanalysis* (Snoeck 1964). And, given their attunement to 'signs of the times', Vatican II defenders of the Sacrament were certainly wise to the fact that confessants were flocking to psychotherapy at the same time they were abandoning the Church. However, as this article hopes to demonstrate, a closer read of these texts shows that the discursive apparatus of these theological texts is much more elaborate, working not just to frame confession as psychotherapeutic practice, but to delineate a semiotic recipe for achieving catharsis within the ritual context of institutional Catholicism.

<sup>8</sup> In reference to this internalized dialogue, numerous commentators suggest that confessional discourse entails a radical split of the subject into the self that reads and the self that is to be read (e.g. Bahktin 1990; Benveniste 1971; Crapanzano 1996; Foucault 1993; Rafael 1993; Ricoeur 1967). For Benveniste (1971), consciousness of self is only possible through internal dialogue between the reading agent and the read text. On the other hand, Bahktin suggests that the kind of 'pure self-accounting' that confession requires – in which one addresses oneself axiologically to oneself in absolute solitariness – is impossible if one allows, to any degree, for the conventional character of signs (1990: 143). Such disquisitions raise the question of the more or less social nature of reading and being read.

<sup>9</sup> Although Foucault increasingly sees confession as a project of self-formation over the course of his writings, he continues to emphasize the integral power of the master. For instance, as Foucault elaborates the dynamics of what he calls 'subjectivation' in the *Hermeneutics of the subject*, he claims that '[t]he discourse of the person being guided has no autonomy; it has no function of its own' (2005: 366).

<sup>10</sup> As Keane (1997) notes, religious observances tend to involve highly marked and reflexive uses of available linguistic resources, rendering religion a particularly potent cultural site in which to examine language ideology.

<sup>11</sup> For instance, in her study of confession among Okiek people in Kenya, Kratz (1991) argues that emerge from the person confessing; rather, the very concept of personhood emerges from the confessional act. Along similar lines, Brooks (2000) suggests that the 'confessional machine' functions to produce the guilt it putatively relieves (also see Alcoff & Gray 1993; Felski 1989; Foucault 1978; 1988; 1993; Ginzburg 1980; Hepworth & Turner 1982; Klenk 2004; Lowney 1999; Murray 1998; Tentler 1977; Valentini & di Meglio 1974; van Zyl & Sey 1996; Zaretsky 1980). This scholarship underscores Tambiah's (1979) tenet that ritual language must be analysed as performative in the Austinian sense, as it always entails what it presupposes.

<sup>12</sup> Ando provocatively opens his essay on Augustinian metaphysics by stating, 'Augustine had no theory of signs' (2001: 24). Yet, according to Ando, as answer to the central question of how humans can secure knowledge of the divine and represent it in words (2001: 32), Augustine offered the following prescriptions, all of which are consistent with the ideology of inner reference as this essay describes it: (1) there are semantically autonomous statements; (2) words are different from and inferior to their referents; and (3) objects always already precede the words that refer to them. Differentiating Christian icons from pagan idols, Augustine refuses a language that refers to created things and converts to a new internal metaphysics in which signs spoken *faithfully* correlate with the invisible substances of inner referents.

<sup>13</sup> See Ricoeur on the 'scrupulous conscience' (1967: 132).

<sup>14</sup> Foucault identifies three major types of self-examination: the Cartesian self-examination scrutinizes thoughts as they correspond to reality; the Senecan examination is interested in the correspondence of thought and rule; and the examination that grows out of a Christian hermeneutics of self is focused on the relationship between 'the hidden thought and an inner impurity' (1993: 46).

<sup>15</sup> In its profane circulations, confession's efficacy depends on the seeming thoroughness of the preceding *examen*. On the legal front, the confession of a person thought unable to reflect lucidly on her actions is not considered court-worthy. Readers express disappointment with autobiographies that do to provide evidence of the author's inventoried consciousness. And, in the context of American addiction treatment, an addict who produces a recovery narrative without first 'taking inventory' of her personal history is considered to be in 'denial' (Carr 2006; 2010a).

<sup>16</sup> One might consider this argument in relation to Stasch's 2003 discussion of the semiotic geography of Koworai feast buildings. Through he is interested in tracing causal linkages between multiple spatio-temporal layers of context, and I show how building context in one 'place' (the conscience) allows for the collapsing of context in another (the confessional), both analyses demonstrate how ritually charged sites are constituted when people's seemingly immediate and essential expressions point back to putative places of origin.

<sup>17</sup> I am indebted to Constantine Nakassis for this evocative description of the cathartic effect.

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## « Signes des temps » : confession et production sémiotique d'une vérité intérieure

### Résumé

Comment se fait-il que la confession, acte de parole dialogique très ritualisé, semble refléter et révéler en toute transparence l'état intérieur de ceux qui s'y livrent ? L'auteure explore cette question en examinant de près certaines défenses post-Vatican II du sacrement de pénitence, qui exposent avec un souci de détail frappant les nécessités d'une confession « moderne ». La lecture attentive de ces textes théologiques montre que les conditions de félicité de la confession sont formées de trois processus (méta)sémiotiques corrélés : (1) la figuration de la mémoire pénitente comme un réservoir de péchés ; (2) l'organisation du temps rituel en étapes distinctes d'élaboration de sens « privée » et d'énonciation « publique » ; et (3) l'effacement du contexte scénique et social de l'énonciation confessionnelle. Ces trois processus réunis restituent les signes indexicaux sous la forme de signes iconiques et naturalisent ainsi la confession comme la révélation cathartique de vérités intérieures déjà constituées en tant que telles.

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