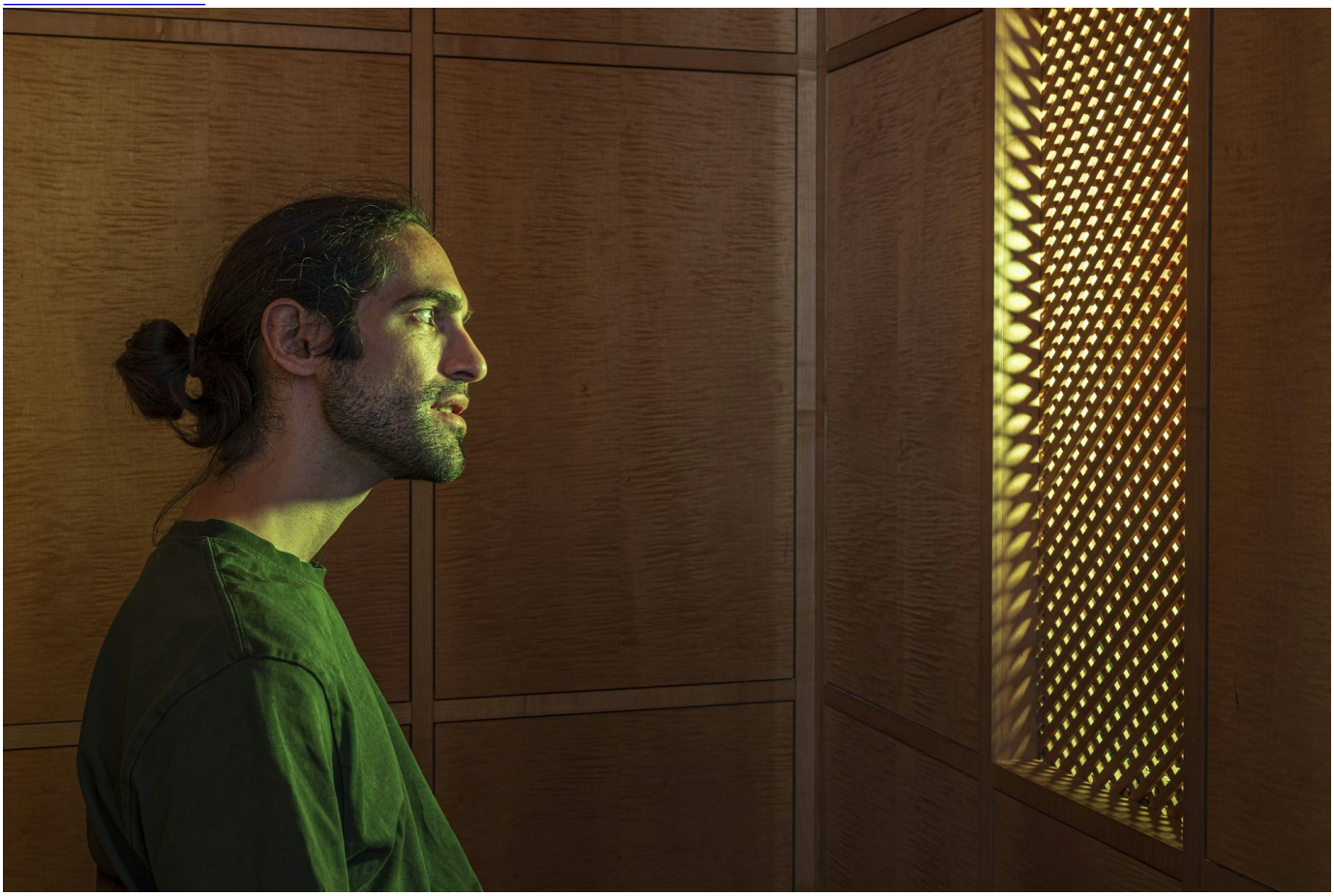
Opinion

Guest Voices



AI Jesus confessional.

Joanne M. Pierce

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This autumn, a Swiss Catholic church installed an AI Jesus in a confessional to interact with visitors.

The installation was a two-month project in religion, technology and art titled "Deus in Machina," created at the University of Lucerne. The original Latin phrase literally means "god from the machine"; it refers to a plot device used in Greek and Roman plays, introducing a god to resolve an impossible problem or conflict facing the characters.

This hologram of Jesus Christ on a screen was animated by an artificial intelligence program. The AI's programming included theological texts, and visitors were invited to pose questions to the AI Jesus, viewed on a monitor behind a latticework screen. Users were advised not to disclose any personal information and confirm that they knew they were engaging with the avatar at their own risk.

Some headlines stated that the AI Jesus was actually engaged in the ritual act of hearing people's confessions of their sins, but this wasn't the case. However, even though AI Jesus was not actually hearing confessions, as a specialist in the history of Christian worship, I was disturbed by the act of placing the AI project in a real confessional that parishioners would ordinarily use.

A confessional is a booth where Catholic priests hear parishioners' confessions of their sins and grant them absolution, forgiveness, in the name of God. Confession

and repentance always take place within the human community that is the church. Human believers confess their sins to human priests or bishops.

Early history

The New Testament scriptures clearly stress a human, communal context for admitting and repenting for sins.

In the Gospel of John, for example, Jesus speaks to his apostles, saying, "Whose sins you shall forgive, they are forgiven, and whose sins you shall retain they are retained." And in the epistle of James, Christians are urged to confess their sins to one another.

Churches in the earliest centuries encouraged public confession of more serious sins, such as fornication or idolatry. Church leaders, called bishops, absolved sinners and welcomed them back into the community.

From the third century on, the process of forgiving sins became more ritualized. Most confessions of sins remained private — one on one with a priest or bishop. Sinners would express their sorrow in doing penance individually by prayer and fasting.

However, some Christians guilty of certain major offenses, such as murder, idolatry, apostasy or sexual misconduct, would be treated very differently.

These sinners would do public penance as a group. Some were required to stand on the steps of the church and ask for prayers. Others might be admitted in for worship but were required to stand in the back or be dismissed before the scriptures were read. Penitents were expected to fast and pray, sometimes for years, before being ritually reconciled to the church community by the bishop.

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Medieval developments

During the first centuries of the Middle Ages, public penance fell into disuse, and emphasis was increasingly placed on verbally confessing sins to an individual priest.

After privately completing the penitential prayers or acts assigned by the confessor, the penitent would return for absolution.

The concept of Purgatory also became a widespread part of Western Christian spirituality. It was understood to be a stage of the afterlife where the souls of the deceased who died before confession with minor sins, or had not completed penance, would be cleansed by spiritual suffering before being admitted to heaven.

Living friends or family of the deceased were encouraged to offer prayers and undertake private penitential acts, such as giving alms — gifts of money or clothes — to the poor, to reduce the time these souls would have to spend in this interim state.

Other developments took place in the later Middle Ages. Based on the work of the theologian Peter Lombard, penance was declared a sacrament, one of the major rites of the Catholic Church. In 1215, a new church document mandated that every Catholic go to confession and receive Holy Communion at least once a year.

Priests who revealed the identity of any penitent faced severe penalties. Guidebooks for priests, generally called Handbooks for Confessors, listed various types of sins and suggested appropriate penances for each.

The first confessionals

Until the 16th century, those wishing to confess their sins had to arrange meeting places with their clergy, sometimes just inside the local church when it was empty.

But the Catholic Council of Trent changed this. The 14th session in 1551 addressed penance and confession, stressing the importance of privately confessing to priests ordained to forgive in Christ's name.

Soon after, Charles Borromeo, the cardinal archbishop of Milan, installed the first confessionals along the walls of his cathedral. These booths were designed with a physical barrier between priest and penitent to preserve anonymity and prevent other abuses, such as inappropriate sexual conduct.



A 17th-century confessional at the Toulouse St. Stephen's Cathedral. (Didier Descouens via Wikimedia Commons, CC BY-SA)

Similar confessionals appeared in Catholic churches over the following centuries: The main element was a screen or veil between the priest confessor and the layperson, kneeling at his side. Later, curtains or doors were added to increase privacy and ensure confidentiality.

Rites of penance in contemporary times

In 1962, Pope John XXIII opened the Second Vatican Council. Its first document, issued in December 1963, set new norms for promoting and reforming Catholic liturgy.

Since 1975, Catholics have three forms of the rite of penance and reconciliation. The first form structures private confession, while the second and third forms apply to groups of people in special liturgical rites. The second form, often used at set times during the year, offers those attending the opportunity to go to confession privately with one of the many priests present.

The third form can be used in special circumstances, when death threatens with no time for individual confession, like a natural disaster or pandemic. Those assembled are given general absolution, and survivors confess privately afterward.

In addition, these reforms prompted the development of a second location for confession: Instead of being restricted to the confessional booth, Catholics now had the option of confessing their sins face-to-face with the priest.

To facilitate this, some Catholic communities added a reconciliation room to their churches. Upon entering the room, the penitent could choose anonymity by using the kneeler in front of a traditional screen or walk around the screen to a chair set facing the priest.

Over the following decades, the Catholic experience of penance changed. Catholics went to confession less often, or stopped altogether. Many confessionals remained empty or were used for storage. Many parishes began to schedule confessions by appointment only. Some priests might insist on face-to-face confession, and some penitents might prefer the anonymous form only. The anonymous form takes priority , since the confidentiality of the sacrament must be maintained.

In 2002, Pope John Paul II addressed some of these problems, insisting that parishes make every effort to schedule set hours for confessions. Pope Francis himself has become concerned with reviving the sacrament of penance. In fact, he demonstrated its importance by presenting himself for confession, face-to-face, at a confessional in St. Peter’s Basilica.

Perhaps, in the future, a program like AI Jesus could offer Catholics and interested questioners from other faiths information, advice, referrals and limited spiritual counseling around the clock. But from the Catholic perspective, an AI, with no experience of having a human body, emotions and hope for transcendence, cannot authentically absolve human sins.