

Online religious Q&A - Advice or an Invitation to Confess?Forthcoming in *Social Media+Society*

Page | 1

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“I can’t promise you my students will not sin; I can promise you they will feel guilty.”

- *Anonymous Rabbi*

What type of intimate questions do people ask religious leaders online? Are they consulting, sharing, revealing, or confessing? My research set out to illuminate how Jewish religious discourse about sexuality is informed by traditional values, western culture and the *materiality* of communication in the 21st century, i.e. new media.

Religion has the power to shape our understanding of gender and sexuality through various forms of authority and regulation (Lovheim, 2013). As religion is increasingly experienced through new media (Hoover, 2010; Hjarvard, 2011), we can postulate on how the use of new media might impact religious conceptions of gender and sexuality. This research offers a first step in that direction. More specifically, I examine Jewish religious Q&A websites to illuminate how this medium informs and regulates understandings and practices of gender and sexuality.

Although new to the online sphere, the practice of Q&A has a long tradition in Judaism, known as Responsa. Religious Jews who use the internet can find websites that invite them to “ask the rabbi.” Keeping in mind that Jewish religious individuals are not encouraged to talk about sexuality with peers, that is, they lack the option to confess, this online-anonymous practice of asking questions can be seen as a Jewish attempt at a private confession. Thus, the

use of online Q&A impacts Jewish religious discourse on sex and gender by moving it from the public to the private, and then, through online sharing, to the public again. By making the concepts of sexuality private, more responsibility is bestowed upon the individual to self-regulate, and, in accordance with Foucault's thesis on self-regulation, this become a technique of self-denial/self-mastery. I suggest that online Jewish religious Q&A operate as digital panopticon, where the practice of asking becomes a tool for self-regulation. However, this self-regulation cannot be complete without a confession. It is in this point that the online Q&A play a double part, as do the Christian confessions for Foucault, as spaces of power-knowledge, as a practice where (traditional/communal/external) authority is empowered, and in the same time, the (individual/internal) self is 'created' and (self) disciplined. Traditional Responsa is understood as a legal document, but when this practice take place online, I argue, at least in topics of sexuality and gender, the users themselves are not looking for a legal consultation, but rather seeking a space to confess their sexual transgressions. What was once a legal, public matter, becomes via new media a form of personal self-regulation. I suggest that this process is informed by cultural norms and social contexts, but it is mediated and made possible through the technology of online Q&A. These websites, through their structure as well as the general culture of online media as a place for sharing, create **technological incitements to confess**. I believe that this concept explains the behavior described in these websites, but further research into the practices of sharing online might find this concept useful for examining other online behaviors.