Sexuality and the Christian Self
Michel Foucault's reading of the Church Fathers

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1. Foucault's 'last book'

Michel Foucault's recently released *Les aveux de la chair* (*The Confessions of the Flesh*) is an important book, certain to generate significant scholarly debate in more than one academic field.[1] The fact that its publication follows after many other posthumous editions of works by the celebrated author should not occlude its special significance. Unlike most other texts published since Foucault's death in 1984, *Les aveux de la chair* was intended as a book by its author. It is ostensibly the manuscript on which Foucault worked during the final months of his life and which he *practically* prepared for publication.[2] For all intents and purposes, it is therefore his 'last book'. In many of its ideas, however, the work goes back further, to the time when its author first conceived of his *History of Sexuality*, in the latter half of the 1970s. It was at that time, having finished *La volonté de savoir* (1976), that he began reading Patristic texts. In fact, he seems to have had almost completed an early version of the present book when it occurred to him that such a study needed the background of Greek and Roman culture to be properly understood. This led to his production of *L'usage des plaisirs* and *Le souci de soi*, both published in 1984, the year of Foucault's death. Thus far, *Les aveux de la chair* brackets, so to speak, what are now volumes two and three of the *History of Sexuality* inevitably holding many clues to the interpretation of the fragmentary project.

Yet *Les aveux de la chair* is not of interest to Foucault scholars alone; it equally merits the attention of those studying the history of Christian ideas especially during the late antique period. Throughout the book, the great theorist shows himself as a careful reader of a surprisingly wide range of Patristic writings building his argument almost exclusively on Greek and Latin primary

[1] Michael Foucault, *Les aveux de la chair*, ed. Frédéric Gros (Paris: Gallimard, 2018). In what follows, I refer to this book as *AC* in inline quotations. An earlier version of the present text is forthcoming as 'L'intériorité de la conscience et l'extériorité des aveux : le sujet chrétien selon Michel Foucault', in: Philippe Chevallier et al. (eds.), *Foucault, les Pères et le sexe, Autour des Aveux de la chair* (Paris: éditions de la Sorbonne, 2021).
[2] Cf. for what follows Frédéric Gros, 'Avertissement', in: Foucault, *Les aveux*, i–xvii.

texts from the period. It must be admitted from the outset that no one, perhaps, can approach Foucault's book from this angle without some rather ambivalent feelings. In 1998, Peter Brown published *The Body and Society in Late Antiquity*, a book that initiated intense discussions about Christian understandings of the body and sexuality in the context of late ancient culture and society.[3] Foucault's work, had it been available then, would undoubtedly have featured heavily in the ensuing scholarly – and not only scholarly – debate.[4] By the same token, however, any appreciation of his book today must come with the caveat that it antedates the wave of specialised research on this topic spawned by the works of Brown and others.[5] It is thus, in a strictly scholarly sense, outdated.

It will turn out, however, that the disadvantage inevitably resulting from the time that elapsed between Foucault's writing and the publication of his manuscript is not as great as might be feared. As we shall see, his chief interest was never in the details of sexual prescriptions, acts, or practices about which we now know much more than we did three decades ago. Rather, his investigation of sexuality in the Patristic period remains faithful to his overall project of establishing the connections between sexuality and the self. Today's world with its ceaseless debates on sexual identities illustrates in abundance, I think, the fundamental thesis Foucault

[3] The relationship between Foucault and Brown's projects is fascinating. Whereas Brown ('A Life of Learning', *ACLS Occasional Paper* no. 55, 2003, 2-3) spoke of an "intellectual friendship" between himself and Foucault in rather vague terms ("intense but largely unplanned conversations"), Foucault himself attributed to his colleague the insight that "what we have to understand is why it is that sexuality became, in Christian cultures, the seismograph of our subjectivity" ('Sexuality and Solitude: Michel Foucault and Richard Sennett' in *London Review of Books*, 3.9 (21 May 1981), 3-7 (accessed 21 May 2020)), indicating that Brown might have had a considerable influence on the fundamental direction of the enquiry in *Les aveux de la chair*.

[4] For the discussion during the 1980s, see the extensive review of volumes 2 and 3 of *The History of Sexuality* by Averil Cameron: 'Redrawing the Map: Early Christian Territory after Foucault' in *The Journal of Roman Studies*, 76 (1986), 266-271. See also Richard Alston, 'Foucault and Roman Antiquity: Foucault's Rome Introduction' in *Foucault Studies*, 22 (2017), 8-30. Alston defends Foucault against critics of his interpretation of sexuality in the Roman Empire by observing that his "project" would have "culminated in early Christian texts" (22): "Foucault was working backwards from the Christian conception of the self to its discursive origin" (*ibid.*).

[5] See, in particular, Kyle Harper, *From Shame to Sin: The Christian Transformation of Sexual Morality in Late Antiquity* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2016). Aline Roussell's important book, *Porneia: On Desire and the Body in Antiquity* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1988), was originally published at the same time as volumes 2 and 3 of *The History of Sexuality*. For the wider discussion about ancient Christianity in its late ancient environment see now: Alan Kreider, *The Patient Ferment of the Early Church: The Improbably Rise of Christianity in the Roman Empire* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2016); Larry Hurtado, *Destroyer of the gods: Early Christian Distinctiveness in the Roman World* (Waco, TX: Baylor, 2016).

sought to establish through his historical research, namely, that the history of sexuality, rightly understood, was not the history of the permissibility or acceptability of certain acts or practices, but a key – perhaps the central key – to the emergence of the Western notion of the self. Thus far, Foucault's interpretation of the *History of Sexuality* and, especially, his interpretation of the role ancient Christianity has had to play within this history is as topical today as it was thirty-five years ago.

As is well known, Foucault ascribed to Christianity a pivotal role in the emergence of modern conceptions of the self.[6] He was not, of course, the first thinker to have made that case; on the contrary, the idea of associating the genesis of the modern world with transformations or secularisations of originally Christian concepts and practices has a long history, going back at least to Hegel.[7] Foucault's theory of the modern self and its Christian roots, however, is deeply critical of what may be called the Hegel-Weber trajectory; in fact, it is clearly intended to offer an alternative to it.[8] Both German thinkers, despite obvious differences between their theories, understand the connection between Christianity and the modern world as a turn towards the subject, which, at the same time, estranged or alienated the human self from nature. Foucault, by contrast, fastened in his analyses on the Christian institution of confession and, more generally, on Christian practices introduced to control and regulate individuals.[9]

In its general contours, this thesis is well known; I will return to it at the end of my article. Foucault's 'last book', however, raises the more specific question of how the history of sexuality in the Patristic era can contribute to his overall account of the origins of the modern self. What clues did Foucault discover in the Church Fathers he investigated, particularly in their views on

[6] For a comprehensive overview of the role of Christianity in Foucault's thought, see: Philippe Chevallier, *Michel Foucault et le christianisme* (Paris: École Normale Supérieure, 2011).

[7] Hans Blumenberg, *The Legitimacy of the Modern Age*, trans. by Robert M. Wallace (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1983).

[8] Especially since Foucault rejects the idea of 'secularisation': Philippe Büttgen, 'Théologie, politique et pouvoir pastorale' in *Annales: Histoire, Science Sociale*, 62 (2007), 1129-1154 (1137-1139).

[9] Moshe Sluhovsky, *Becoming a New Self: Practices of Belief in Early Modern Catholicism* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2017), 33-36, 193-198; Arianna Sforzini, 'L'autre modernité du sujet: Foucault et la confession de la chair. Les pratiques de subjectiviation à l'âge des Réformes' in *Revue de l'historie des religion*, 3 (2018), 485-505.

sexuality, towards his larger project? Or how far, conversely, did his preconceived theories determine his approach to the historical material he studied? These are the questions with which the present article will mostly be concerned.

My examination will largely be based on *Les aveux de la chair*, a book that has yet to be fully mined in its potential for theological and religious studies. The present analysis can, thus, only be preliminary. I nevertheless hope that, as such, it may offer an appropriate tribute to the anniversary issue of the *Toronto Journal of Theology* which has, for fifty years now, contributed so much to the study of Christianity in the broadest possible sense.

2. Sexuality and Self in Ancient Christianity According to Foucault

Let us start with a brief analysis of the argument Foucault advanced in *Les aveux de la chair*. As already mentioned, the book is written with a considerable and impressive expertise in late Ancient Christianity.[10] Drawing on a diverse set of Greek and Latin authors from the second to the fifth century, the author depicts a time of fundamental transition in the history of Western culture. Transition, however, is not the same as rupture. In fact, Foucault is as keen to emphasise continuities between Hellenism and Christianity as he is willing, obviously, to identify the conceptual and practical innovations introduced by the new religion.

The authors Foucault uses are the major thinkers one would expect in such an account: Clement of Alexandria, Tertullian, Cyprian, Methodius of Olympus, Gregory of Nyssa, John Chrysostom, Augustine, and Cassian, to mention only the most important ones. There are, however, two remarkable limitations in the scope of this study that merit mention. Firstly, Foucault begins his account with Clement of Alexandria, a Christian author writing at the turn of the third century. This seems rather late. After all, Christianity had existed since the first century, and from

[10] Stuart Elden, 'Review: Foucault's Confessions of the Flesh' in *Theory, Culture & Society*, published online: https://www.theoryculturesociety.org/review-foucaults-confessions-flesh/ (accessed 21 May 2020). See also: Stuart Elden, *Foucault's Last Decade* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2016).

its inception topics related to sexuality were mentioned and discussed among its followers. Foucault sometimes (rather rarely) discusses passages from the New Testament, but where he does so, he considers them only in light of their exegesis by the Fathers.

Foucault informs us that the Fathers of the second century "could not have found the principles [of their doctrine on *aphrodisia* or sexual pleasures] in primitive Christianity nor in the apostolic scriptures – except for the strongly Hellenizing letters of Saint Paul" (AC, 2). The Patristic ideas on sexuality are thus the result of a 'Hellenization of Christianity', to use Harnack's famous phrase. It is intriguing to observe in this connection that Harnack himself dated 'early Catholic Christianity' separated from the religion of the New Testament by its exposure to Hellenism from the mid-second century. Foucault seems to posit the same historical watershed, not merely with regard to Patristic conceptions of sexuality but also for the origin of what he calls the 'Christian pastorate', as pointed out by Philippe Chevallier.[11] More generally, Michel Senellart has spoken of the "*apousia* of Christ" in Foucault's understanding of Church history;[12] in fact, it may be more correct to diagnose an *apousia* of primitive Christianity as a whole!

Insofar as, for Harnack, the theological critique of the Hellenization of Christianity was closely bound up with a historical reconstruction according to which there existed a radical discontinuity between the world of primitive Christianity and that of the second-century Church, the comparison with Foucault on this point is instructive beyond the easy quip.[13] For reasons he does not make explicit, Foucault evidently shared with the liberal Church Historian the idea of a categorical break between the religious movement of the first century and the church that constituted itself as an institution at the end of the second. Yet while the Lutheran theologian sought the true core of the Christian religion in the original Gospel of Jesus Christ and found signs

[11] Philippe Chevallier, 'Étudier l'église comme 'gouvernementalité" in *Bulletin de centre d'études médiévales d'Auxerre*, 7 (2013), published online 29 March 2013: https://journals.openedition.org/cem/12874 (accessed 21 May 2020), 1.

[12] Michel Senellart, 'Michel Foucault: Une autre histoire du christianisme?' in *Bulletin de centre d'études médiévales d'Auxerre* 7 (2013), published online 29 March 2013: https://journals.openedition.org/cem/12872 (accessed 21 May 2020), 7.

[13] Adolf von Harnack, *What is Christianity?* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1986), 191–193. For this theory, see: Johannes Zachhuber, *Theology as Science in Nineteenth Century Germany: From F.C. Bauer to Ernst Troeltsch* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), 162-173, 280-281.

of corruption in its later development, Foucault showed a complete lack of interest towards Christianity's primeval state and occupied himself instead solely with the great institutional structure that began to emerge one hundred and fifty years after the crucifixion of its founder.

The second limitation of Foucault's project seems directly related. As much as Christianity only comes into his view *at the moment of* its contact with Hellenism, as much is it only interpreted *against the backdrop* of Hellenic thought and practice. Christianity, one is tempted to say, is presented by Foucault as a transformation or mutation of classical culture; other historical influences on its character are more or less entirely ignored. The most striking instance of such an omission is Judaism, which – hard though it is to believe – is almost entirely absent from Foucault's reconstruction of the history of sexuality in the patristic age.[14]

I cannot discuss or criticise these two interrelated limitations of Foucault's account in detail here. Nevertheless, to grasp the character of Foucault's grand narrative of Western history, one must take into account that, for him, Christianity is ultimately a hinge connecting classical and modern culture and explaining the otherwise inexplicable transition from the former to the latter. In order for it to function in such a way, however, Christianity must be understood as a product or result of Hellenism: a modified product, to be sure, but a product nonetheless.

As for the change introduced by Christianity vis-à-vis Hellenism, the student of Foucault's previously published works will not be surprised to learn that in *Les aveux de la chair*, too, the author stringently rejects the commonly held view according to which Christianity is set apart from the pagan culture of its time by way of a particular hostility towards the flesh, the body, and sexuality.[15] Throughout the book, Foucault is keen to deny such a perception of Christianity's innovation.

[14] Elizabeth A. Clark, 'Foucault, the Fathers, and Sex' in *Journal of the American Academy of Religion*, 56.4 (1988), 619–641 (622). I must admit that Foucault did consider the "Hebrew" background of the Old Testament in his genealogy of the "Christian pastorate", see: Chevallier, 'Étudier l'église', 6.

[15] Mark Blasius relates Foucault's response to an American student in 1980, calling the idea of an *antisexual Judeo-Christian morality* a "dangerous myth": Michel Foucault, 'About the Beginnings of the Hermeneutics of the Self: Two Lectures at Dartmouth' in *Political Theory*, 21.2 (1993), 198-227 (199).

"With Christianity," he insists, "we did not move from a code tolerating sexual acts to a severe, restrictive and repressive code" (*AC*, 50).

Foucault therefore, rightly, emphasises the affinity between the prescriptions regarding sexual acts in the apologists of the second century and those of contemporaneous stoic philosophers.[16] Their views converge on the limitation of sexual acts to the conjugal context; they also share the fundamental principle according to which the only legitimate goal of sexual acts is procreation. Indeed, apologists "like Justin or Athenagoras argue to the emperors to which they address themselves that Christians put into practice, with regard to marriage, procreation and *aphrodisia*, principles identical to those of the philosophers" (*AC*, 2-3).

Foucault's textual analyses are always subtle and nuanced: he notes that Clement of Alexandria departs from the Hellenistic tradition when he inscribes sexuality into a grand theological system determined by the cosmological and anthropological doctrines of early Christianity. While "the content of his teaching", Foucault observes, is "absolutely consistent" with that of the Hellenistic philosophers, "Clement's entire endeavour is to insert these known and common aphorisms into a complex web of citations, references, or examples that make them appear as prescriptions of the Logos, whether expressing itself through nature, human reason, or the word of God" (*AC*, 9).

Nevertheless, the author concludes that Clement's teaching on sexual practices in his *Paedagogus*, which he considers typical of the ancient church in general, is more or less identical to the principles found in the Church Father's pagan contemporaries: Clement's writing thus "testifies (…) to a great continuity with the texts of pagan philosophy and ethics of the same period, or of a period immediately prior [to his]."[17] The Christian author takes part in "the same

[16] Foucault is here following the research of Paul Veyne. See his important article 'La famille et l'amour sous le Haut-Empire romain' in *Annales: Economies, Sociétés, civilisations*, 33 (1978), 35-63 (39): "the question is quickly decided: all the transformations of sexuality and conjugality predate Christianity."

[17] Here, Foucault seems to be subtly distancing himself from the historical interpretation suggested by Veyne (cf. previous note). For Veyne, the foundation of Christian morality represented a radical transformation compared to "the era of Cicero and the century of the Antonins" (*ibid.*, 35).

kind of prescription: a 'regime' of life defining the value of acts in function of their rational ends and 'occasions' allowing them to be carried out legitimately." In Clement, we thus find "the same prohibitions (adultery, debauchery, defilement of children, relations between men), the same obligations (having the procreation of children in mind when one marries and has sexual relations), with the same reference to nature and its lessons" (*AC*, 46).

Foucault pursues the same strategy when discussing the opinions of the Fathers on virginity. He cites Galen, the famous physician of the second century, who compared the Christians (and Jews) to (pagan) philosophers due to their self-constraint.[18] According to Foucault, this comparison indicates that the ideal of virginity – living outside of marriage in perpetuity and abstaining entirely from sexual acts – was in no way surprising to the cultured Greek: Galen's testimony, he writes, "is interesting insofar as, regarding the fact [sc. of a life of sexual abstention], he hardly sees it as anything novel" (*AC*, xx).

I expect few of Foucault's readers will be wholly convinced by this thesis. After all, if there are many Christian books celebrating virginity,[19] there is, by contrast, probably not a single one of pagan provenance extolling the same virtue. Foucault is of course right to assert that the affirmation of virginity amongst Christians was integrated into a larger conception of spiritual life and the order of salvation, according to which "virginity is (…) both part (*élément*) of a world without death and the seed of that world: fragmentary token of that [sc. transcendent] world here below and entry-point into the celestial reality that it constitutes" (*AC*, 124-131). Moreover, he brilliantly observes that the identification of sexuality with concupiscence in Augustine – Foucault speaks of a "libidinization of sex" (*AC*, 238) – served to align the Christian conception of the good of marriage with the ideal absolute of virginity:

[18] Galen, Πλατωνικῶν διαλόγων συνόψεις III. This work by Galen is lost and the fragment cited by Foucault is preserved in Arabic citations, which are rather diverse. See: Richard Walzer, *Galen on Jews and Christians* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1949), 15, 91-93.

[19] On the topic of Christian virginity, see: Brown, *Body and Society*; Susannah Elm, *Virgins of God: The Making of Asceticism in Late Antiquity* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994).

> With the idea of concupiscence as evil, it was possible to join up, under one and the same concept of spiritual combat, the exercise of virginity and the practice of marriage. In both states, we have to deal with the same evil; the same renunciation of the concupiscent form of the will is required [in both]: the difference being that, in marriage, the rejection [of concupiscence] goes along with a certain kind of its use, from which virginity skilfully turns away (*AC*, 261).

For Foucault, the central theme of a history of sexuality, as is well known, was the emergence of an intimate connection between sexuality and subjectivity. The author's entire account in *Les aveux de la chair*, from the apologists of second century to Saint Augustine in the fifth, is consequently aimed at a vision in which the originally Hellenistic sexual morality will be profoundly transformed and integrated into a Christian conception that defines the relation of the subject to itself. In the theory summarised in the above quotation, Saint Augustine, according to Foucault's reconstruction, arrived at the classical Christian theory that, presumably, was subsequently passed on to the medieval world and from there to modernity. In this theory, sexuality is closely aligned with the libido and thus with concupiscence; concupiscence, however, stands at the centre of the human person insofar as they are separated from God by their sinful volition. According to Foucault, the point is not, however, that sexuality is bad but that its basic impulse is so closely intertwined with our identity that understanding it was tantamount to the knowledge of our true selves.

The reader of a history of sexuality in the Patristic era naturally expects a presentation and discussion of Christian ideas on marriage and virginity, and as we have seen, Foucault's book does not disappoint in this regard. There are other elements and aspects of *Les aveux de la chair*, however, that are less expected; some are arguably surprising. A first observation is that Foucault, unlike Peter Brown, was apparently not particularly interested in the specific details of sexual practices or in debates on asceticism among the Christians of late antiquity. At the same time, however, he does include depictions of practices that are not obviously tied to or associated with sexuality.

Notably, he provides detailed analyses of the development of the baptismal catechesis and the early forms of confession. While the two sections dealing with these Patristic institutions are written with the same scholarly rigour as the rest of the book, their presence in Foucault's work inevitably raises the question of why they were included?

3. Foucault's interpretation of ancient and modern Christianity

To reply to this question, it is helpful to consult a brief text appended to *Les aveux de la chair*. In this short note, entitled 'Ce qu'il s'agit de démontrer', Foucault expresses his conviction that

> […] there is a relatively constant core of prescriptions in Christianity. This core is old. It took shape before Christianity. […] It is the new definition of the relationship between subjectivity and truth that will give to this ancient core of prescriptions an altogether novel meaning, adding important modifications to the ancient conception of [sexual] pleasures and their economy" (*AC*, xx).

In other words, in his final book, Foucault did not intend to investigate in detail the prescriptions or prohibitions of sexual practices issued by the authors of the early Church because he did not think that these prescriptions or prohibitions constituted anything particularly novel compared to earlier Hellenistic ideas. His fundamental interest was in uncovering a transformation regarding the self that occurred when ancient Christianity replaced Hellenistic culture. For him, as we have seen, this transformation was already indicated by the Patristic discourse on virginity and by the "libidinization of sex" in Augustine. Nevertheless, it was the creation of institutions such as the baptismal catechesis and the penitential system through which the ancient Church, according to Foucault, introduced a "new relationship between subjectivity and truth."

The claim is well known to the reader of Foucault's later work. For example, in his 1980 Dartmouth lectures, published as 'About the Beginnings of the Hermeneutics of the Self', Foucault had demonstrated the difference between the Greek ideal of *paideia*, the education of a student ordained to intellectual independence, and the penitential discipline of monasticism, grounded on

the Christian doctrine of original sin and institutionalised in the principle of absolute obedience towards the abbot.[20]

Foucault's interest in these questions should not, therefore, surprise us. On the contrary, the origin of the Christian institution of confession and its relationship with the imperative of "truth-telling" are problems closely associated with the intellectual project the theorist pursued during the final decade of his life.[21] Comparing, for example, his 1979-1980 lecture course at the Collège de France, entitled *On the Government of the Living*, with the newly available text of *Les aveux de la chair* is instructive in this regard as it reveals a considerable amount of material overlap.[22] At the same time it is notable that, in the former context, Foucault discussed the Patristic forms of these institutions with barely any indication of their supposed relationship to the problem of sexuality.

In *Les aveux de la chair*, he clearly meant to integrate the two or, at least, intended for his readers to consider the two as forming a unity. And yet, the absence of much textual material here beyond the resources he had already marshalled in his lectures *On the Government of the Living* is rather telling. It indicates, I believe, that in writing his last book Foucault did not possess extensive textual evidence in support of his intuition that the history of penal and, more generally, confessional institutions during the Patristic period was closely aligned with the contemporaneous development of a Christian conception of sexuality. Ultimately, Foucault's book presents us with two separate accounts without achieving their complete integration. This is not to say that such an integration will forever be impossible. In the light of Foucault's own book, however, it seems right to conclude that it remains a possible but not a necessary interpretation of the historical material.

Why then was Foucault so evidently convinced of the complementarity of patristic views on marriage and virginity on the one hand, and the disciplinary institutions of the ancient Church

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[20] Foucault, 'About the Beginnings', 215-221.

[21] See Elden, *Foucault's Last Decade*, 45-80, 112-133.

[22] Michel Foucault, *On the Government of the Living: Lectures at the Collège de France (1979-1980)*, ed. by Michel Senellart, trans. by Graham Burchell (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014), 83-325.

on the other? This question can be answered, I would like to suggest, by reconstructing Foucault's reading of ancient Christianity as *teleological*, determined by the ultimate goal of his historical narrative, namely his interpretation of the emergence of Western modernity.[23] In other words, the connection between the different levels of Foucault's analysis in his last book becomes more evident as soon as we take into consideration the rather strong link between the understanding of sexuality and the disciplinary institutions within the Catholic Church of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, and subsequently, according to Foucault, within all modern societies of the Western world.

In proposing such a reconstruction of Foucault's theory of the Christian transformation of the classically subject in late antiquity, my main intention is not to criticise, let alone reject it. *The History of Sexuality* is clearly meant as a genealogy of the contemporary world; its goal, therefore, is not 'objective' history, so to speak, but an account of the sources of the modern self, to borrow the title of Charles Taylor's famous work.[24] The success of such a project thus depends chiefly on its capacity to explain how we have become who we are.

In order to understand Foucault's account of the link between sexuality and subjectivity in ancient Christianity along those line, we must briefly recall two assumptions that are of constitutive importance for his interpretation of the relationship between Christianity and the modern world. The first of them is his rejection of a radical opposition or antithesis between the two. Foucault strenuously rejected the idea of an essentially secular modern world while similarly refusing to think of the Middle Ages as the paradigmatic or classical period of Christianity. On the contrary, he followed his colleague at the Collège de France, the historian Jean Delumeau, in his critique of the idea of the Middle Ages as Christianity's golden age and his corresponding, provocative thesis

[23] For a similar interpretation, see: Moshe Sluhovsky, 'Confessing Subjects and the Construction of Modern Catholic Selves' *Culture & History Digital Journal*, 6.2 (2017): http://dx.doi.org/10.3989/chdj.2017.013 [consulted 23 May 2020]. According to Sluhovsky, "Foucault had early modern Catholicism in mind when he presented the cognitive revolutions concerning sinfulness he attributed to late antiquity."

[24] Charles Taylor, *Sources of the Self: The Making of the Modern Identity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989).

that during the age of Reformation and Counter-Reformation Europe's Christian identity was deepened and intensified.[25]

The second major assumption in Foucault's account is his insistence on the unique significance of Penitence for Tridentine Catholicism. This too he shared with Delumeau who wrote the history of this specifically Western institution from the introduction of compulsory private confession in the thirteenth century until the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries when it arguably reached its peak.[26] Foucault, for his part, thought of the rite of Confession as a privileged configuration of the relationship between power and knowledge, a classic case of what he called alethurgy, the idea – so characteristic of Christianity – of a duty always to tell the truth about oneself, to confess sins and temptations, not simply to oneself, but also to another, normally a priest, the confessor.

Taken together, these two assumptions explain the role Christianity played, according to Foucault, in the genesis of the modern world. Put briefly, Christianity was fundamental for the understanding of the modern subject insofar as it produced the 'alethurgic' institutions that contributed to the emergence of a new form of political and social power. It thus stood at the origin of more secular institutions that later contributed to the forging of our own world, such as the penal system, psychiatry or psychoanalysis.[27]

Sexuality, as understood by Foucault, is an aspect of this order. Talking about sexuality is talking about the self in the context of modern alethurgy: my sexuality is my-self! Consequently, the modern understanding of sexuality depends on the truth-telling institutions fashioned based on the model of ecclesiastical Confession. Understanding sexuality in this sense, then, is

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[25] In his lectures at the Collège de France on the *Abnormal* (1974-1975), Foucault identifies with the interpretation of "a number of historians" who presented the sixteenth century as "a phase of in-depth Christianization" (trans. by Graham Burchell (London: Verso, 2003), 177). As the editor notes (196n18), Foucault is obviously alluding to Delumeau's book *Catholicism between Luther and Voltaire: A New View of the Counter-Reformation*, trans. by J. Moiser (London: Burns & Oates, 1977).

[26] Jean Delumeau, *L'aveu et le pardon: Les difficultés de la confession* (Paris: Fayard, 1990). See: Sluhovsky, *Becoming a New Self*, 109.

[27] Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality*, vol. I: *An Introduction*, trans. by Robert Hurley (New York: Pantheon Books, 1978), 58-59. See also: Elden, *Foucault's Last Decade*, 52-53.

tantamount to understanding its emergence in the Catholic Church's penitential system.[28] Yet, as the roots of this system obviously extend to the Patristic era, the origins of its intimate link with the Christian self had to be identified in this historical period as well. This hypothesis undoubtedly *motivated* Foucault's investigation of the history of sexuality in the Patristic era, the result of which is found in *Les aveux de la chair*. I do not consider it unlikely, however, that it could also have *influenced* his perception and his reading of Patristic texts. In other words, Foucault discovered what he was expecting to discover.

At one level, Foucault's expectation to find in the writers of Christian antiquity the roots of all the elements constitutive of medieval and modern Christianity is, I think, entirely justified. After all, these authors were not called Church Fathers without a reason. Their authority over all subsequent Christian thinkers was huge, and we find few later theological ideas or ecclesiastical practices that were not justified with reference to Patristic sources. Yet it is one thing to recognise the foundational role of Patristic texts for later developments, quite another to take authoritative references to them at face value. Despite their ostentatious display of respect for the Patristic tradition, medieval and early modern Christians were always at least partly guided by concerns and interests germane to their own situation, and their reading of the Church Fathers was inevitably coloured by those conditions. Here, Foucault's teleological perspective became a problem insofar as it seems to have led him to expect a more clear-cut pre-formation of early modern Christianity in late antiquity than the Patristic sources provide, underestimating the 'creative' dimension of later readings of the Fathers and their texts.

Yet his problem was not merely one of historical hermeneutics. As much as Foucault's perspective influenced his interpretation of the ancient sources, it also narrowed his perception of their subsequent reception history. The open-endedness of Patristic texts, namely, corresponds to an irreducible plurality of Christian traditions to have emerged from the crucible of ancient

[28] For a very different account of the relationship between Christianity and sexuality see: Sarah Coakley, *God, Sexuality, and the Self: An Essay 'On the Trinity'* (Cambridge: CUP, 2014).

Christianity. There is not one, single trajectory starting with the ancient Church and leading to Western medieval Christianity and, subsequently, to post-Tridentine Catholicism, as Foucault's narrative seems to suggest. The Eastern Orthodox Church, for example, is also a historical product of ancient Christianity, but it never introduced compulsory private confession, and has therefore never known the problematic Foucault detects in Western modernity. The Protestant Churches, from another perspective, more or less abolished private confession in the sixteenth century and therefore drew on the Patristic traditions of the Christian self in yet another form.

Foucault's teleological approach to the problem of sexuality and the self in the Fathers, then, while it may not have led him to misinterpret the historical material, certainly seduced him to expect more univocal and definitive results than the sources allowed in the interest of sustaining a more deterministic interpretation of the history of Christian ideas than is justified by the plurality of Christian traditions and Churches.

4. The Interiority of Conscience and the Exteriority of Confession

In the final section of my article, I would like to broaden my perspective beyond Foucault's interpretation of the Fathers in *Les aveux de la chair*. In doing so, my intention is not to leave behind the subject matter of Foucault's last book but to place it within the larger context of the debate about the modern self and its roots in late ancient Christianity. Speaking of the distinction or even contradiction between the 'exteriority' of Confession and the 'interiority' of conscience, I refer to the fascinating contrast between Foucault's interpretation of Christianity's transformation of late ancient culture and its major rival, according to which the new religion fundamentally effected a turn to the subject, the inner self. In my introduction, I identified the latter theory with a tradition flowing from G.W.F. Hegel and Max Weber. Today, it is perhaps most prominently represented by Charles Taylor who, in his celebrated *The Sources of the Self*, entitled his chapter on Augustine *In*

interiore homine.[29] According to this interpretation, Christianity's innovation, its orginality compared to its ancient environment, rested on its tendency to prioritise internal experience over against its manifestation in the visible world. In the realm of morality, the motivation of our acts thus became more important than their realisation; traditional rituals, such as public sacrifices, were abolished; faith as an internal attitude and the personal acceptance of the doctrines of the Church gained increasing importance, and so forth.[30]

At first sight, this theory of interiority (admittedly a somewhat simplistic phrase) stands in stark opposition to Foucault's view of ancient Christianity with it accentuation of the confession of sins and the consequent necessity of disciplinary institutions.[31] Nevertheless, a comparison of these two accounts may be able to show that, notwithstanding their differences, they are not entirely dissimilar. First of all, it must be noted that both of them are, in fact, 'teleological' interpretations of ancient Christianity. That Foucault's interpretation of Patristic Christianity gains its full meaning only from the vantage point of early modern French Catholicism should by now be clear. But the opposite thesis, too, unmistakeably has its *telos* in modernity whose, ultimately Hegelian, understanding as the age of subjectivity determines a retrospective interpretation of Christianity as the religion of interiority which *in this manner* can appear as the historical preparation for our own world.[32]

We are therefore dealing with two visions of ancient Christianity each constructed with the intent of sustaining a particular understanding of the modern world. One of those, one is tempted to say, is Catholic and French, the other, Protestant and 'Germanic'. For the former, modernity is a cultural formation characterised by disciplinary institutions derived from the

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[29] Taylor, *Sources of the Self*, 127. Cf. Augustine, *De vera religione* (PL 34, 154): 'Noli foras ire, in teipsum redi; in interiore homine habitat veritas.' Taylor translates (*ibid.* 129): 'Do not go outward; return within yourself. In the inward man dwells truth.'

[30] For a similar account, though also emphasising the historical importance of Judaism, see Guy Stroumsa, *La fin du sacrifice: Les mutations religieuses de l'Antiquité tardive* (Paris: Odile Jacob, 2005).

[31] In that sense, Sforzini rightly speaks of "another modernity of the subject" in Foucault in 'L'autre modernité du sujet'.

[32] See Taylor's book, the subtitle of which indicates the author's main interest.

penitential system of the seventeenth-century Catholic Church. For the latter, it is the history of human withdrawal into the interiority of their selves with the result of humanity's alienation from a more and more 'disenchanted' world as well as the atomisation of individuals who lose their traditional identities as members of a community.[33] Both, however, agree that modernity needs Christianity, a religion with an historical origin in late antiquity, in order to be understood. Both, consequently, trace the characteristics of modernity ultimately back to the religious world of late antiquity.

One may also wonder whether these two visions of modernity are as starkly contradictory as they appear. Is it the case, for example, that the observation in modernity of disciplinary institutions on the one hand and the individualisation or even atomisation of society on the other, are as antithetical as they initially appear? Or is there not, rather, a subtle dialectic between the two by means of which 'Foucaultian' disciplinary institutions emerge precisely in a 'Weberian', individualised world as, for example, seems to happen in the context of today's social media networks which represent perhaps the most stunning case of contemporary alethurgy?[34]

Let me return, however, to late antiquity and ancient Christianity. There too, the two theories emphasising the verbally articulated confession and the interiority of one's conscience, respectively, may well refer to phenomena that are interrelated rather than mutually exclusive. After all, the need for such a spoken confession was itself rooted in the importance given to the realm of human interiority. It was the theological and pastoral significance accorded to thoughts, intentions, motivations, and temptations, all of which remain forever invisible and inscrutable in the human soul unless revealed by the individual themselves, that created the need for complicated technologies of confession. And it is perhaps worth adding that these technologies, powerful

[33] Johannes Zachhuber, 'Martin Luther and Modernity, Capitalism, and Liberalism' in *The Oxford Research Encyclopaedia of Religion* : http://religion.oxfordre.com/view/10.1093/acrefore/9780199340378.001.0001/acrefore-9780199340378-e-301 [accessed 26/05/2020].

[34] For a comparison that demonstrates, in that sense, rather instructive parallels between Foucault's and Max Weber's visions of modernity, see Colin Gordon, 'The Soul of the Citizen : Max Weber and Michel Foucault on Rationality and Government' in Sam Whimster, Scott Lash (eds.), *Max Weber: Rationality and Modernity* (London: Allen & Unwin, 1987), 293-316.

though they may have been, nevertheless always required the voluntary cooperation of the individual believer.

In this sense, Foucault's conception of the Christian self reveals, I believe, a fundamental aspect of Christianity as a social and cultural force: it changed or transformed the balance between human interiority and exteriority with far-reaching yet always ambiguous results. The societies brought into being by Christianity valorised the individual's inner life in an unprecedented way ultimately leading to the idea that the freedom of individual conscience required the strongest possible legal protection. Yet at the same time and – in a way – by the same token the same societies also invented brutal institutions to investigate, control, and intervene in, the individual's innermost core. The same rise in importance given to human inwardness, in other words, that strengthened its cultural and legal protections, made increasingly attractive and enticing attempts to enter, violate, manipulate, and conquer the human soul.

Sexuality, as Foucault saw clearly, offers an important illustration of this principle and, when recognised as a fundamental aspect of our identity, its role in modern society is as Janus-faced as that of our subjectivity more generally. While our secular, or more precisely post-Christian, culture has honed its capacity to cultivate and protect each person's sexuality as a unique expression of their humanity and freedom, this same idea becomes the basis for abuse and humiliation undermining and perverting the humanitarian ideal on which modern society is premised. To understand the modern self in this ambiguity, knowledge of its genealogy is arguably key, but no such knowledge is possible without a secure grasp of the deep transformations during the centuries of late antiquity and their durable influence in later Christian societies. The publication of *Les aveux de la chair* gives us the opportunity to remind ourselves of this important fact. Its readers will be grateful for Foucault's probing questions even where they may not always find his answers equally persuasive.