

ARTICLE

Fascinating Flesh: Revealing the Catholic Foucault

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ABSTRACT. The Catholic dimension in Foucault's examination of the Church Fathers is featured because neglect of it may misrepresent the very notions of virginity and of flesh in *Confessions of the Flesh*. Failure to appreciate the tension between a seditious flesh and an incarnational flesh implicitly confines the Patristic vision to the limited modern field of "sexuality." The fourth volume might be best interpreted against the background of the investigations that prompted Foucault to immerse himself in religious texts and spiritual experiences: his early writings on literature; the later interest of his lectures in pastoral technologies; and his witnessing of the political-spiritual movements both in Islam (the Iranian revolution) and in Catholicism (the anti-military protests in South America and the anti-Communism denunciations of Pope John Paul II).

Keywords: anti-pastoral struggle, Catholic, incarnate flesh, seditious flesh, virginity.

Three memories guide my approach to Michel Foucault's *Confessions of the Flesh*. There is the arresting opening of his *Discipline and Punish* with its dramatic contrast between a public execution and the prison's time-table: the shock of discontinuity that is also embedded in this fourth volume of his history of sexuality. Originally its themes were to be determined by the second volume in this series, *La chair et le corps (Flesh and Body)*, and the early Christian architects and architecture of this "new experience" would have provided a dramatic contrast to the modern perspectives of the introductory text. A second memory is his playful introduction to *The Order of Things*, where he recalls his laughter and wonderment at the Borges quotation from a certain Chinese encyclopedia that gives a bizarre taxonomy of animals that shatter the familiar landmarks of the thought that "bears the stamp of our age" and that should demonstrate the "stark impossibility of thinking *that*" classification.¹ Does our own reading of *Confessions of the Flesh* ever evoke

¹ Michel Foucault, *The Order of Things* (1973), xv.

wonderment or at points even laughter at trying to think some of what Foucault is reporting from the era of the Church Fathers? The effect of that scholarly reporting is to subvert the very project of a “history of sexuality” and certainly to put yet another nail in the coffin of the anachronistic thesis of the repressive hypothesis. But perhaps it also manifests Foucault’s own inability to fully think out the experience of the flesh in early Christianity, his very understandable confusion in grasping the dynamic interaction of a flesh that is both incarnational (witnessing to godly presence) and seditious (reminding us of our fallen state). In the light of that incapacity, is it surprising that Greek and Roman practices of the self would come to lure him into a more customary, less challenging philosophical study than his study of Christianity’s dealings with the flesh might have opened? The third memory is from his 1980 lectures at the Collège de France, *Du gouvernement des vivants* (*On the Government of the Living*),² which I attended and where at one point he introduced the writings of the fourth century monk John Cassian: the lecture hall soon filled with bewilderment and the murmur of a common question, “Cassian, qui est-ce?” “Qui est-ce?” “Cassian, who is that?” This was particularly amusing to me because, as a novice in the Jesuit order, I had to suffer reading large excerpts from Cassian’s conferences and I found it astonishing that the avant-garde Foucault, whom I came to Paris to learn from, was echoing the interests of my pious novice master. In fact, I thought there must be some other Cassian to whom Foucault was making reference. Although we may be familiar now with the name Cassian, the bewilderment of that 1980 audience may still be beneficial for us to share. Many of us who are dedicated readers of Foucault are also very ignorant of the spiritual continents Foucault is exploring in *Confessions of the Flesh*, and perhaps we are far too eager to locate its insights within his earlier concerns with institutionalized confessional technologies.

Let me give two examples of this ignorance: When I was a student in Paris, Foucault asked me to arrange for a private meeting with some theologians with whom he could discuss his study of Christian texts. We met at the beginning of May, 1980 in the Jesuit community where I lived at the time. The very first question he posed to the theologians (one of whom was a distinguished Patristics scholar) concerned the notion of *ophelé, debitum*, “debt” in Christian understandings of marriage relations. It was clear that Foucault was disappointed with their all too predictable replies, but the conversation then moved on to other topics. I was pleased to see that he elaborated this notion in *Confessions of the Flesh*.³ A second, more striking example of our limited knowledge: Perhaps the single most prominent encyclopedic volume published in English that treats Michel Foucault was released at the end of 2014 by Cambridge University Press as *The Cambridge Foucault Lexicon*.⁴ Its almost 800 pages contain 91 articles by 72 authors from many different academic faculties. Among the themes treated there are only four brief entries that directly

² Michel Foucault, *Du gouvernement des vivants* (2012); Michel Foucault, *On the Government of the Living* (2014).

³ Michel Foucault, *History of Sexuality vol.4, Confessions of the Flesh* (2021), 218-220.

⁴ Leonard Lawlor and John Nale (ed.), *The Cambridge Foucault Lexicon* (2014). A rather comprehensive review by Colin Gordon may be found in “Cambridge Foucault Lexicon,” *The History of the Human Sciences* 29:3 (2016).

touch theological issues: “Christianity,” “Confession,” “Religion,” and “Spirituality.” I am the author of the first three and Edward McGushin composed the last. Despite the wide range of themes examined in the *Lexicon*, there is no reference to such important topics as the “pastorate” or “pastoral theology” in general; its index has no mention of “virginity” or even “flesh.” Of the 25 thinkers who have essays dedicated to them in the volume, not a single figure who appears in *Confessions of the Flesh* is included. It may be understandable that Foucault’s concern with some lesser known Christian writers might not have been appreciated: one even thinks, for example, of Clement of Alexandria, Cyprien, Gregory of Nyssa or Tertullian. But the Cambridge *Lexicon* has no article even on Augustine or Cassian, who had been important in Foucault’s work for many years. And these omissions despite the fact that over the years, before and after his death, there have been many publications in English either by Foucault himself or by others on his relation to religion, spirituality and to Christianity in particular.⁵

The neglect by this volume is also striking in its omission of explicitly Catholic themes, and that omission is a standard practice in commentary on Foucault. Although there has been a growing appreciation of Foucault’s interest in such Christian practices as confession and such religious figures as Cassian, this general recognition of concern with Christian culture has rarely reached the sophisticated level of grasping the specific Catholic dimension in Foucault’s examination. This neglect would be a significant liability in detecting unique accents in his treatment of sexuality in *Confessions of the Flesh*. While sexual matters came to be developed at greater length in the four volumes of the history of sexuality, they emerged with perhaps most arresting force in some of his early writings on literature. This is how he opened his 1963 essay on Georges Bataille:

We like to believe that sexuality has regained, in contemporary experience, its full truth as a process of nature, a truth which has long been lingering in the shadows and hiding under various disguises—until now, that is, when our positive awareness allows us to decipher it so that it may at last emerge in the clear light of language. Yet never did sexuality enjoy a more immediate natural understanding and never did it know a greater “felicity of expression” than in the Christian world of fallen bodies and of sin.⁶

But it is not just a world of fallen bodies and sin, as he continues in the essay, because that world is not separable from traditions of mysticism and spirituality. And it is there

⁵ For example, there were David Galston, *Archives and the Event of God: The Impact of Michel Foucault on Philosophical Theology* (2011); Jonathan Tran, *Foucault and Theology* (2011); James Bernauer & Jeremy Carrette (ed.), *Michel Foucault and Theology: The Politics of Religious Experience* (2004); Henrique Pinto, *Foucault, Christianity and Interfaith Dialogue* (2003); Jeremy Carrette, *Foucault and Religion: Spiritual Corporality and Political Spirituality* (2000); Jeremy Carrette (ed.), *Religion and Culture by Michel Foucault* (1999). Among the numerous articles devoted to Foucault and Religion, the essay by John McSweeney should be noted as particularly worthwhile: “Theology ‘after’ Foucault?” *Milltown Studies* 52 (2003), 117-151.

⁶ Michel Foucault, “A Preface to Transgression” [1963], in *Language, Counter-Memory, Practice*, ed. Donald F. Bouchard (1977), 29.

that the complex set of negotiations with oneself making up Christian experience “lead, without interruption or limit, right to the heart of a divine love of which they were both the outpouring and the source returning upon itself.”⁷ In this network of erotic events, we touch enduring Catholic encounters with “flesh.” It has almost never been noted that Foucault’s literary interlocutors in that early period had, as he himself did, a traditional Catholic formation. Bataille, Pierre Klossowski and Maurice Blanchot were all Catholics, and the first two actually spent time exploring religious vocations.⁸ The cover of volume IV’s English translation genuflects to this Catholic dimension by its inclusion of a drawing of rosary beads.

Still, there may be a possible bewilderment in reaction to the fact that such a Catholic theme as virginity occupies almost one hundred pages of *Confessions of the Flesh*, but it is important to recognize that for Foucault virginity is sexually significant and confirms his Catholic sources. And we should not be surprised by that because as Peter Brown has pointed out: “From an early period, in some sectors, and universally after around 300 C.E., the ideal of virginity, practiced equally by men and women, enjoyed a moral and cultural supremacy in the Christian church that remained unchallenged until the Reformation.”⁹ Is an understanding of virginity and the modern reduction of it to mere physical intactness not essential to what later came to be designated “sex” and that category’s facile association with repression?

A hypothesis: It is crucial to appreciate that the inquiries of Volume 4 emerge from the work of what was to be volume 2 in the original plan of his history of sexuality: *La chair et le corps (Flesh and Body)*. My view is that Foucault initially thought that he would be able to draw this distinction with relative ease: a differentiation between the pre-modern Christian culpabilisation of the body as the flesh versus the spirit (“the moral physiology of the flesh”¹⁰) on the one hand and the modern materialistic approach to the sexual body on the other. If these were clearly differentiated, the road would be opened to the research of his original project: a volume 3 (*The Children’s Crusade*) 4 (*Woman, Mother, and Hysteric*), 5 (*Perverts*), and 6 (*Populations and Races*).¹¹ What happened to this original project? Did the theme of virginity in the thinking of the early Fathers and its concomitant experience of the flesh generate a more complex field than Foucault had originally expected? Did virginity find itself enfleshed in a mystical ecstatic elevation as rich as any threat of subversion of the spirit? This realization would certainly have created fresh complexity for Foucault and his original plan. I believe it did.

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Philippe Chevallier, *Michel Foucault et le christianisme* (2011), 244-245. Chevallier is unique in the examination of this Catholic literary milieu.

⁹ Peter Brown, “The Notion of Virginity in the Early Church,” in *Christian Spirituality: Origins to the Twelfth Century*, ed. Bernard McGinn and John Meyendorff (1987), 427.

¹⁰ Michel Foucault, *Abnormal* (2003), 189.

¹¹ Foucault had already reminded us of one example in the conflict between Christian approaches and modern approaches to sexuality in *Herculine Barbin: Being the Recently Discovered Memoirs of a Nineteenth-Century Hermaphrodite* (1980).

In general contemporary discussion, virginity is most often associated with loss in descriptions such as one loses one's virginity or one forfeits one's innocence; with women we hear of a "deflowering" and the "taking or stealing of virginity"; with men it is most often different: the loss of a childhood innocence that is regarded as a door into maturity. There are certainly numerous current perceptions of how virginity is in fact lost and loss does seem to provide the basic context for how virginity is approached. And this is even the case when discussing certain cultures that regard virginity as a "valuable commodity" that may be exchanged for other goods. The cultures of the Church Fathers certainly grasp this reality of loss because it opens out to the post-virginal rebellious state of a flesh that is dominated by a struggle with spirit; this seditious flesh invites both the development of disciplines which manage the flesh as well as the creation of systems of discernment which interpret the struggles between angelic and demonic movements within individual souls. These discernments of consolations and desolations cry out for the wisdom of an interpreter to whom obedience is rightfully owed. This is a very familiar story in discourse on Foucault. Technologically, this is the achievement of the practices fashioned by Cassian; theologically, this is the complementary system of Augustine. Recall Foucault's earlier remark in "Sexuality and Solitude": Adam was ashamed of his sexual organs because they were moving by themselves without his consent. "Sex in erection is the image of man revolted against God. The arrogance of sex is the punishment and consequence of the arrogance of man."¹² This is the story that Foucault's interlocutors often encouraged him to develop and augment. And this is what he largely did. And my expectation is that most commentators on this volume will focus with variations on the story of spirit versus flesh, a story that is a familiar path into kindred categories of sexual activity, disciplines of sexual repression as well as foreshadowings of modern sexuality and the will to truth and knowledge about it. But that approach, as tempting as it would be for contemporary secularized commentators, would not do justice to the complexity of what Foucault studied in this volume, namely, the interaction of incarnate flesh and seditious flesh.

Pagan and Christian ascetical traditions are separated by a wall, often breeched, from the mystical Christian tradition of virginity. This mystical tradition guards in an ineffable way the pre-Fall kingdom of life which was once intended for all men and women, and which was inaugurated again in even more splendid fashion in God's second great moment of Creation, the Incarnation of God, the Word becoming flesh. This cosmic Incarnation, this return to the pre-Fall possibility, is concretized in the waters of baptism and in the art of virginal existence. As Foucault writes, within this is a conception of the very history of the world.¹³ And how does virginity celebrate the flesh? By the refusal of death, by removing oneself from that struggle between life and death that concluded volume one in his history; death was far more menacing to that Patristic age than sexual lust, and Foucault cites Gregory of Nyssa's joyful acclamation of death's defeat by vir-

¹² Michel Foucault, "Sexuality and Solitude" (1997), 175-184.

¹³ Foucault, *Confessions of the Flesh*, 153-154, 134.

ginity.¹⁴ Virginité escapes regular comprehension; it overcomes nature and history and all Law, and dwells in eternity. The state of virginité is not lost through physical actions but through an ignorance that starves the soul. Inspired by God and God's Love, the Virgin man and the Virgin woman are new creations. How may this new creation, this glorified flesh, be understood? Certainly not through the categories of sexual asceticism or renunciation. Virgins are not masters and mistresses of renunciation but rather witnesses of the spiritual marriage that unites them with the God who is both fully divine and fully human. This witness is also to one's personal unity of body and soul. The sin that needs to be confessed, as Augustine saw, is not the pains of human embodiment as such but rather the fracturing of the human person into conflicts of body and soul, spirit and flesh.¹⁵ And, as Foucault points out, this participation leads them to an incarnate art of living that embraces the most refined pagan aesthetics. There is the example he gives of Clement of Alexandria, who traces this culture of the self not from the pagan philosophers with whom Clement was very familiar but from the inspired Biblical authors.¹⁶ And Clement affirms, "There is nothing meritorious about abstinence from marriage unless it arises from love to God." And virginité itself may be reclaimed after marriage in Christian discipleship.¹⁷

So what has happened to eclipse for many the mystical art of virginité by physical acts of sex? Is it but another example of the simplification of erotic life which mirrors that displacement of rigorous spiritual discernment by the establishment of rote confessional practices and eventual universal mandates that Foucault examined in volume I? Does Christian faith in an Incarnate God demand a more robust and nuanced grasp of flesh than contemporary sexual understandings make available for both Christians and non-Christians? Will that vital belief solicit what Foucault imagined in his 1978 course, namely a "counter-conduct," an "anti-pastoral struggle" ("la lutte antipastorale").¹⁸ This struggle is novel—Foucault said that "while there have been anti-feudal revolutions; there has never been an anti-pastoral revolution."¹⁹ In today's Catholicism, however, some do claim that there is a pastoral schism regarding sexual matters. But the Middle Ages produced not only types of pastoral power but also a theological repertoire of counter-conducts, "all of which tend to redistribute, reverse, nullify, and partially or totally discredit pastoral power in the systems of salvation, obedience and truth": there are five forms he features: asceticism, communities, mysticism, Scripture and eschatological beliefs.²⁰

¹⁴ Ibid., 146-147, 149-150 (*On Virginité*).

¹⁵ David G. Hunter, "Augustine on the Body," in *A Companion to Augustine*, ed. Mark Vessey (2012), 353-364.

¹⁶ *Confessions of the Flesh*, 3-11.

¹⁷ Clement of Alexandria, "On Marriage," (*Stromateis III*) #51; "On Spiritual Perfection," (*Stromateis VII*) #72 in *Alexandrian Christianity*, ed. John Oulton and Henry Chadwick (1954), 64, 139.

¹⁸ Michel Foucault, *Security, Territory, Population* (2007), 215; Michel Foucault, *Sécurité, territoire, population* (2004), 219.

¹⁹ Foucault, *Security, Territory, Population*, 204-214.

²⁰ Ibid.

Confessions of the Flesh is in alliance with this novel anti-pastoral struggle in two striking ways. The first was the still inchoate, for Foucault, insight that religious affirmation might proclaim a robust, incarnational activity rather than display any slavish dependence upon a weakened subversive presence. At the same time that he was immersing himself in religious texts, he was also witnessing the Iranian revolution of 1978-1979. In an interview about his impressions of that, Foucault recalled the frequency with which Karl Marx's remark on religion as the opium of the people is cited, but then he points to the previous sentence of Marx and continues, "religion is the spirit of a world without spirit. Let's say, then, that Islam, in that year of 1978, was not the opium of the people precisely because it was the spirit of a world without a spirit."²¹

Catholicism was also engaged in a spiritual combat that Foucault recognized in Poland when he lived there (1958-1959) and later when he followed with intense interest Pope John Paul II's 1979 pilgrimage there that became the catalyst for the Solidarity movement which Foucault publicly supported. Even earlier in Brazil, Foucault witnessed a Catholic incarnate presence in its combat with the right-wing government. To give one example: in 1975, a prominent Jewish journalist, Vladimir Herzog, was killed while in police custody, an event that intimidated the Jewish community there. The Archbishop of São Paulo decided to organize an inter-denominational memorial service for the murdered journalist, and this is Foucault's impression of the event:

(The service) drew thousands and thousands of people into the church, on to the square and so on, and the cardinal in red robes presided over the ceremony, and he came forward at the end of the ceremony, in front of the faithful, and he greeted them shouting: 'Shalom, shalom.' And there was all around the square armed police and there were plain clothes policemen in the church. The police pulled back; there was nothing the police could do against that. I have to say, that had a grandeur of strength, there was a gigantic historical weight there.²²

This grandeur of strength was the spiritual-political power unleashed by that incarnational flesh that Foucault glimpsed on occasion in examining Patristic texts.

More frequently on display though was Catholic attachment to the subversive effect of flesh, and this dimension also had significant political consequence. And that consequence was certainly evident in the triumph of fascism and that ideology's utilization of modern sexuality, a phenomenon that Foucault frequently recognized and which provided the conclusion to his introductory volume in the history of sexuality series. Geoff Eley has justification in canonizing Foucault as the "patron saint" for the study of Nazism, and my own work in this area has attempted to draw attention to the sexual dynamics of the Nazi movement.²³ Even a resister who came to be executed, Helmuth James von Moltke, could write to his wife in 1940 that he found one thing to praise in

²¹ Michel Foucault, "Iran: The Spirit of a World without Spirit," in *Foucault and the Iranian Revolution*, ed. Janet Afary and Kevin Anderson (2005), 255.

²² Michel Foucault, "On Religion," in *Religion and Culture*, ed. Jeremy Carrette (1999), 107.

²³ Geoff Eley, "Scholarship Serving the Nazi State I," *Ethnic and Racial Studies* 12:4 (1990), 576; James Bernauer, "Sexuality in the Nazi War Against Jewish and Gay People," *Budhi* 2:3 (1998), 149-168.

Nazi culture: it taught, he said, a reverence for what is below us--"blood, ancestry, our bodies".²⁴ During this period of decisive change in German culture, we find an obsessive series of Catholic statements denouncing the social permissiveness of co-education and its supposed lack of concern for the lust in children and adolescents; regularly denounced was the immodesty intrinsic to public swimming pools; and then there were the many warnings about the dangers of nudity and male friendships. Eugenio Pacelli, later Pope Pius XII, wrote a 1929 report on the general situation of the German Church which called for campaigns against the cult of nudity, the mixing of sexes in gymnastic exercises, the provocative clothing women wore in sports and the widespread immorality in literature, film and theatre.²⁵ This ecclesiastical tone, promoted in many Christian approaches to eroticism and sexuality, was all too often an education into a self-contempt and is an excellent example of the political consequence of taking flesh only as a subversive reality. Although these political implications are not put forward in *Les Aveux de la chair*, they form the broader context for his investigation of Christian writers, especially when it was conceived as the second volume of the series.

In conclusion, let us recall a remark Peter Brown made: he wrote that such notions as "virgin life" have come to carry with them "icy overtones" for us, and even today they still crowd in upon us as "pale, forbidding presences." When historical study gives them, he continues, their "due measure of warm, red blood," the "chill shades may speak to us again, and perhaps more gently than we had thought they might, in the strange tongue of a long-lost Christianity."²⁶ Has the prejudice that identifies Catholic Christianity as intrinsically tied to the repression of the erotic and sexual spheres blinded us to its celebration of the flesh? And certainly that state of blindness to incarnational reality includes Catholics themselves no less than other Christians, as well as disciples of other faiths or of no faith. Few have demonstrated the fact of that blindness and challenged it as successfully as did the art historian Leo Steinberg in his *The Sexuality of Christ in Renaissance Art and in Modern Oblivion*.²⁷ If the redeemed sexual reality of Jesus could be ignored for so long in Western culture, as Steinberg argues it was, should there be surprise that our own fleshy reality could be misinterpreted? Even by ourselves. And not fully recognized by Foucault either. Still, perhaps unintentionally, Foucault's *Confessions of the Flesh* will contribute to that warming of icy notions and make more problematic that neglect and misinterpretation.

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²⁴ Helmuth James von Moltke, *Letters to Freya: 1939-1945* (1990), 110.

²⁵ Hubert Wolf and Klaus Unterburger, *Eugenio Pacelli: Die Lage der Kirche in Deutschland 1929* (2006), 131-139.

²⁶ Peter Brown, *The Body and Society: Men, Women, and Sexual Renunciation in Early Christianity* (1998), 446-447.

²⁷ Leo Steinberg in his *The Sexuality of Christ in Renaissance Art and in Modern Oblivion* (1983).

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