Inspired by Michel Foucault, we are inclined to interpret psychoanalysis as the heir of the Catholic sacrament of confession, and, consequently, we focus on the different effects of both practices upon the construction of an own subjectivity. However, we should not forget that Foucault’s death impeded him to publish the *Confession of the Flesh* that was intended to elaborate on the topic. Having Foucault’s first volume of the *History of Sexuality* in mind, we would have expected a book with a focus on the nineteenth-twentieth century. That would be in line with his theories on *epistêmè* and his analysis of religion in his early works. However, Foucault is said to have jumped to early Christianity. In order to have the material to understanding this move, we sketch the mostly unknown history of confession until today.

Just as I was preparing this talk, the recent movies *The Confessions* (2017) and *La Confession* (2017) appeared on the screens, relaying the Japanese *Confessions* (2010), and so we can go on, until the famous *True Confessions* (1981). It is as if the theme of confessing, despite of having becoming obsolete in many countries, like Belgium, and in many forms of Catholicism, like Flemish Catholicism, resurrected in the cinemas. The reincarnation of lost practices in the virtual reality. For the fantasy of many people it is fascinating that someone is the custodian of hidden facts, that he or she should not divulge what many others would like to know. Nevertheless, the practice was accepted for centuries, until recently. A few weeks ago, a Flemish priest was prosecuted as he had hold back that he knew that one of his penitents was suicidal. He was charged for not having warned the psychiatric services that his penitent could commit suicide. In the same way, the professional secret of a psychotherapist becomes challenged. In this case, it is essentially the danger of paedophilia that has put legal limits to the professional secret. One can wonder how long the professional secret of lawyers will stand. All this would introduce an interesting philosophical, psychological and ethical inquiry about the function of obliged secrecy in various domains, and opening e.g. the question why paedophilia is a heavier argument than murder to put professional secrecy under attack.

I will not enter this debate today, as it seems important to me to sketch the origin and the evolution of the practice of confession in the Catholic West. We should know what is and what was at stake before entering the debate on how we have to value or to discredit it in our curious post-Christianity, where militant atheists propagate simplistic views on religion and churches are unable to react as they have lost their intellectual potential. Another reason to focus on the history of
confession has to do with the unexpected news that the famous second volume of Foucault’s *History of Sexuality*, which was written by him but not published, would be in the bookshops next February.

The basic question behind all those questions is if a human being needs a place where he can talk with someone, or at least be listened to, in order to acquire more knowledge of his or her own identity. In other words: do we need a hidden place where we become opaque to others to become more transparent to oneself? And this question still stands once we have left its Christian embedding. Perhaps this is the basic contribution of Michel Foucault’s *History of Sexuality* to the understanding of our time.

**Catholic confession: a complex problem**

Thus the question about confession is to be put as follows: does it simply consist in admitting what you have done, thus what you already know, or is it a process to elucidate for yourself why you have done it and who you are really? However this question does not appear as we look at the definitions of ‘Confession’ in the dictionaries.

The Webster dictionary

1 a :an act of confessing; especially :a disclosure of one’s sins in the sacrament of reconciliation
b :a session for the confessing of sins go to confession
2 :a statement of what is confessed: such as
   a :a written or oral acknowledgment of guilt by a party accused of an offense
   b :a formal statement of religious beliefs :creed the Augsburg Confession of the Lutheran Church
3 :an organized religious body having a common creed

The Cambridge dictionary

1. The act of admitting that you have that you have done something wrong or illegal:

   *I have a confession to make - I've lost that book you lent me.*

   [...]

2. An occasion when a Christian tells God or, especially in the Roman Catholic Church, tells a priest formally and privately, what they have done wrong so that they can be forgiven:

   *Have you be to confession recently?*

   *The priest heard his confession.*
If this were the central and essential meaning, the point would be that you know by beforehand what you have to confess and that there is no opacity in this knowledge. The opacity would be between you and the others, who do not know what you have confessed and are puzzled: did he confess, and what does the priest know that he should not tell us? This establishes an opaque interaction between various people and transparency would be a problem at that level. But for he or she who ‘went to confession’ the central question were not transparency about the confessed act, but about the feelings coming up (and intended to come up) when forcing oneself the ‘confess’ what one would rather like to hide.

However, history teaches us that the history of confession is much more complex and reflects the painstaking emergence of individual subjectivity in the Western culture. Sketching this history in concise way, we will see how the original rite of reconciliation, the ‘canonical penance’, initially meant to re-admit those who had forsworn Christianity in the days of persecution. It disappeared for the heavy consequences imposed to the penitent and it was replaced by an adapted form of spiritual guidance, that had grown in the Egyptian monasteries in the fourth and fifth century. The private ‘confession’ was born and a catalogue of sins and corresponding penance circulated. After the council of Trent (1545-1563) those catalogues were replaced by treatises of moral theology dealing with the inner freedom needed to commit sins and the right remorse needed to be forgiven. A systematic reflection on all the possible ways of sinning against the ten commands was elaborated. Foucault was struck by the fact that sexuality took an important part in those treatises and that sexual behaviour became linked with the structure of someone’s personality. He developed the theory that confession became the cradle of expressing oneself as an identity, a sexual identity in particular.

**A short history of confession**

The history of confession starts in the third century, a period of heavy persecutions, with the basic question if Christians who had abandoned their faith in order to save their life, could be readmitted in the community later on.\(^1\) Once persecutions were over, the same problem was discussed about grave sinners, especially murderers, idolaters and adulterers. There was a heavy controversy on the matter, but finally an agreement was reached: they should confess their sins in public, do a lot of penance (especially fasting) and stand behind in the church with the other penitents. They were not admitted to Eucharistic communion until the bishop granted them the

---

reconciliation. The precise way how this process should be conducted was defined by many local councils in the canons they issued, hence the name ‘canonic penance’. However, once reconciliation was granted, life could not be resumed as before. One was not allowed to wear weapons (a difficult matter in those days), one should refrain from activities related with trade, one should give a lot of alms and one should not have sexual relations, even in the case one was married.

As this reconciliation could be granted only once in lifetime and, as the consequences were so heavy, most Christians waited until they were dying before asking for it, if they needed it. Thus the practice disappeared about the fifth century.

Let us notice that there was little hidden in this process. The sins concerned were grave and known, they had a heavy social impact and both entering the group of penitents and the reconciliation were public. There was complete transparency. This would change now, both for the penitent and for the community, when a new way of penance came up.

In the meantime a different practice had grown before in the monasteries in the Egyptian desert. Those monks, living a very ascetic life, alone or in communities, aimed to progress into sanctity. They had established an own psychological model for it. They distinguished eight passions or vices (‘demonic thoughts’) that should be fought and eradicated, in a very precise sequence.² Those vices were:

Gluttony
Impurity (lust; sexual immorality)
Avarice
Sadness
Anger
Acedia ("noonday demon"; sloth)
Vainglory
Pride

There was a very complex psychological view on the relation between the distinct vices or demonic thoughts. Eating only one olive and not two could be seen as spiritual progression, but one should not be proud of it! Nevertheless, pride should only be fought at the end of this spiritual path, as its energy was needed to have the courage to continue the spiritual journey. There are more interesting and puzzling aspects in this spiritual polemology, as Michel Foucault will remark, e.g. that the monk who did not fight down pride at the end of his path will fall back to the

---

beginning of this series, however not completely: not in gluttony but in sexual lust...
A dim thought ahead of narcissism?

We cannot enter into a detailed examination of these demonic thoughts, that
survive until today in the ‘seven deadly sins’ of Catholic theology. For our purpose
the essential element is that the monk had to discuss his inner struggle with an
other, more experienced, monk. He had to tell him in private his defeats and his
victories, and he had also to disclose his dreams. Spiritual guidance makes entrance
and introduces three types of opacity: the awareness of the opacity in the inner of
the confessing monk, the opacity in the relation with the directing monk as there is
no reciprocity in this confession, and the opacity in the relation with the external
world, which is excluded from this confessing process, as it is from monastic life in
general which is per definition anachorēsis, leaving the world.

Monachism was introduced in Europe by John Cassian (360-435), one of the
theoreticians of this inner battle. In 415 he founded the monastery of Saint Victor in
Marseille. From there on monachism spread primarily over the Celtic world, Ireland
becoming the cradle of the re-Christianization of the West after the collapse of the
Roman Empire. Its practice of spiritual guidance was adapted to become a new way
of forgiving sins, with similarities and differences.

The similarity consisted in the fact that one could often go to confession and
that it became even a duty to do so if one had committed a major infringement. The
council of Lateran IV (1215) stated that every parishioner should confess his or her
sins to the parish priest every year, just before Eastern. This confession was private
and the priest was not allowed to divulge anything he learned from the penitent.
The dissimilarity consisted in the fact that the fight between the vices was not the
structuring centre of the practice any more (soon we will be entitled to speak about
a ‘sacrament’). It became centred around an enumeration of the committed sins, not
only the severe ones as murder, idolatry and adultery. After the confession, penance
was imposed to the penitent, and in order to harmonize the imposed penance
practices, libri penitentiales circulated. They mentioned for every sin the amount of
penance that should be carried out. For that reason this practice is often referred to
as the ‘tariff penance’.\(^3\)

There is no reflected systematisation in those penitential books, just a series
of subject matters following each other. One is surprised that one topic is almost
always present, often as the first one: drunkenness, associated with the Eucharist.

---

\(^3\) The basic edition of all the texts is still F.W.H. Wasserschleben, *Die Bussordnungen der
adendländischen Kirche*, Halle: Graeger, 1851. There is a more recent edition with translation into
CUP, 2014.
The satisfaction imposed also increased if the sin has been performed by a cleric in a higher rank:4

1. If a bishop or someone who has been ordained is subject to the vice of drunkenness, he should stop or be dismissed.
2. If a priest or a dean or a monk would have drunk so much that they are really stoned, they should do penance for 20 days.
3. If they are drunk and vomit, they do penance for 15 days.
4. If they had got the Eucharist before, they do penance for 60 days.
5. If a dog comes and eat the host, they should do penance for 100 days.
6. However, if lay people, who don’t make vows, get drunk, they should do penance for 10 days. If they vomit, 20 days, if this happens with the Eucharist, 15 days.

One is struck by the fact that the penitentials deal with some topics, like murder, as if they were a normal part of daily life, and that other topics deserve less attention, like robbery. Sex becomes a hot issue, and not just adultery. Especially in later penitentials, the various sexual practices, performed within or outside legal marriage, become a matter of concern. ‘Sodomia’ and sex with animals are often put together as being nearly the same, sexual intercourse between men using the tights and fellatio are mentioned, woman using dildoes too.5 The imposed penance is heavier when it happens frequently or habitually, but those acts are simply put in a row, the differentiation being the status of the perpetrator.6 Although the old list of the vices is known, its intrinsic dynamics is lost. When this list appears in the beginning of one of the first penitential books, the penitential of Egbert, archbishop

4. ‘1. Si quis episcopus aut aliquis ordinatus ebrietatis vitium habet, aut desinat aut deponatur.
2. Si quis presbyter aut decanus vel monachus inebriaberint se usque ad crapulationem, XX dies penit[eat].
3. Si per ebrietatem vomitaberen, XV diebus peniteant.
4. Si cum eucharistia, LX diebus penit.
5. Si cane sumitur sacramentum, C dies penit.
5. ‘Si mulier cum muliere fornicaverit, III annos peniteat. Si sanctaemoniales cum sanctaemoniali per machinam fornicatur, VII annos peniteat.’ Wasserschleben p. 223. For more sexual acts, see 223, 237, 262, 449.
of York (731-767), it simply serves to distinguish the most important sins (*capitalia crimina*) from the lighter ones (*peccata minores*) such as theft and false testimony.\(^7\)

It would be fascinating to investigate the way of life of the people where those penitentials have functioned - or were supposed to function. We find sentences about the question if you can eat meet from animals being found dead, killed by other animals or strangled in nets, if you can eat horses, if you can drink blood or, even, if it is a sin to swallow the blood coming out of your own teeth (be reassured, it is not). There are also canons about sorcery and magic, and about the use of philtres to instil reciprocal love in your beloved. One should admit that, despite of this strange enumerations, a nuclear psychology is nevertheless present. The distinction is made between planning an act, e.g. a forbidden sexual intercourse, and the real achievement of it. Thinking and planning something forbidden, even if it is not achieved, has also to undergo penance.

We can say that this tariff penance, urging people to confess their sins secretly to the priest, is a foreshadowing of the feelings of guilt that the Church will try to instil in its believers later on. The turning point is the Council of Trent, the Catholic reaction to Reformation.

Martin Luther is best known for his harsh critique of the selling of indulgences. People were told that they could redeem the penance imposed to them by money offering. Giving money was also a way to free the soul of a deceased person from the purgatory, the place where many people had to become ‘purified’ before they could be admitted into heaven. One sentence from the advertisement of indulgences to be bought has become famous: ‘As soon as the coin in the coffer rings, the soul from purgatory springs’. Behind Luther’s opposition against salesmen sent by Rome, like the notorious John Tetzel, dwelling through Germany in order to sell as much indulgences as he could for the building of the Saint Peter’s basilica in Rome, there was a more fundamental issue at stake: is God radically good or can he be angry? Contrary to the later Calvin, according to Luther, God is a loving God, dispensing his grace for free, and there is no reason to be afraid of him. You should not merit his grace, but you have just to open your heart, becoming confident.

The Council of Trent agreed up to a certain point with Luther, but stated that fear could nevertheless be a useful instrument to bring people to Christian life. Of course, if a human being could deplore his or her sins driven by the pure love for God, he would be forgiven. This was the perfect or complete repentance. No confession was needed. But you should be nearly a saint for that. Common people were driven by the fear of hell, and thus their repentance was imperfect or incomplete. Their sins could only be forgiven by confession, that was now really called a sacrament.

7. Wasserschleben, 233-234.
The rise of moral theology

The rise of the practice of confession since the Council of Trent gave an impulse to moral theology. Lots of treatises were written, discussing every detail of Christian life. They were new in various aspects. Instead of simply listing various acts, they discussed them in a systematic whole. The Ten Commands became the pivotal element in a system encompassing the totality of human life. There was also something radical new: the question of inner freedom defined as the core of a human act. Your deeds were nor subject to moral evaluation if they were not stemming from a free mind, and people were told they had to investigate the part of conscious, free will in their life. One should become conscious of the perturbing effect of passions, the excusing consequences of ignorance and the pathological functioning of conscience in scruples. Humans were taught that there was a hidden part in themselves that should be unveiled in their private whispers addressed to a confessor who was supposed no to know who they were. Although the theory between both is very different, one can understand that Michel Foucault would interpret confession as the forerunner of psychoanalytic practice.

But next to a reflection on what is a good functioning conscience (today we would speak about a healthy conscience), there is another important element introduced by moral theology in the confession practice: the awareness that you have to submit to the moral authority of theologians, but that those authorities can differ in their judgements. There has been an important controversy about this issue. Are you right when you stick only at one of those authorities, it could be the most tolerant one (probabilism and laxism) or do you have to accept the most secure authority, even if it were the most strict (probabiliorism and tutiorism).

There is another similarity between psychoanalysis and confession: the significance conferred to sex. We cannot but be amazed when looking at the innumerable details in the sexual act that had to be confessed, neither at the extension of the field of sensuality. The question was put if smelling a rose contained so much sensuality that it could be a mortal sin (a sin that brings you to hell), and there were of course several opinions. More important is the emphasis that shifts from the peculiarity of the deeds toward the persons with whom it took place. In the very influential handbook of moral theology of Alphonsus de Liguori (1696-1787), that has been a reference for centuries, there is a passage that must

8. A first volume containing the first chapters of the book (on conscience, law, sin and virtue) has recently be published in English: (tr. Ryan Grant) Post Falls: Mediatrix Press, 2017. This publishing house is ‘owned and operated by a Roman Catholic husband and wife team, Mediatrix Press is a small business dedicated to bringing rare and never before seen Catholic books to you at an affordable price. :) [sic]’
has struck Foucault: the discussion on the difference between *sodomia perfecta* and *sodomia imperfecta*. The question is if you should focus on the use of the anus in order to determine if it was sodomy, or if you should look at the persons involved. In the latter case, you can distinguish *sodomia perfecta* (male with male or woman with woman) from *sodomia imperfecta* (male with woman). For De Liguori, the person is the criterion to be considered, and the use of the anus is only a secondary matter.9 Lesbian sex too can be *sodomia perfecta*.10

The discussions of the details of the sexual acts seem to be evaluated as making sexuality transparent. They are described in a direct way, not hidden, at least by the moral theologians writing in Latin. Ordinary people should be protected and De Liguori’s manual for the penitents remains vague in this regard. In the advises for confessing them, it is explicitly said to be prudent in questioning them, in order not to give them some new ideas. In the books written in vernacular, passages on sex are written in Latin, and that will continue, even in a widespread manual ‘for priests and lay people’ (subtitle of the Dutch translation) still in use in the 1950s...11 Thus sex is also something mysterious, just as the right conscience is finally mysterious, while the free will is permeated by the power of passion and sensuality at the one hand, and can go over the top in scrupulosity at the other. And there is no way out in just obeying authority, as one should know that there are various moral theologians writing on the topic and that they can disagree.

But the practice that gave birth to that elaborate but still incomplete theory is univocal: confession. Confess everything that could be wrong, even your thoughts, especially those dealing with sex. And here Michel Foucault comes in, and he loves to quote De Liguori: ‘Examine diligently, therefore, all the faculties of your soul:

---


memory, understanding, and will. Examine, with precision, all your senses as well. [...] Examine, moreover, all your thoughts, every word you speak, and all your actions. Examine even your dreams, to know if, once awakened, you did not given them your consent. And finally, do not think that in so sensitive and perilous matter as this, there is something trivial or insignificant.'

Michel Foucault’s intuitions cover unsolved problems

Foucault’s history of sexuality begins with a critique of another history of sex, the book of Jos Van Ussel, that has been translated in many languages, also in French, but not in English, and has therefore often been ignored. The book is not explicitly referred to, but it is so recognizable in its ‘repression theory’ quoted by Foucault, who mentions the book explicitly in his lectures at the Collège de France in 1974-1975.

Van Ussel’s book, Geschiedenis van het sexuele probleem [History of the sexual problem] (1968), is written as a reaction against a fairly common view of the Victorian Age. According to that view, prudery would have invaded Western Europe, particularly Great Britain, during the reign of Queen Victoria (1819-1901). From this period on, sex became a taboo. Sexual education for girls was reduced to this famous piece of advice given to them the night before marriage: ‘Close your eyes and think of England.’

In his book Van Ussel uses the ‘civilisation theory’ of Norbert Elias (1939), which holds that the process of civilisation goes from Fremdzwang (external control) to Selbstzwang (self-control). The Western development of self-control is taken to be induced by the rise of industrialisation and capitalism. To be able to use

12. There must be a mistake in Foucault’s quotation on the obligation of saying everything, even the thoughts, about sexuality in confession, where he refers to Liguori Préceptes sur le sixième commandement in a French translation of 1835, p. 5. (Fr 30, note 2, Engl 21, note 3). This book does not seem to exist. Foucault means probably the Instruction sur les préceptes du décalogue et sur les sacramens [sic] and I found an edition: Lyon: Rusand, 1832 (Foucault refers to an unknown edition of 1835.) There I found p. 143 in the 6th chapter (‘Tu ne commettras pas de fornication’) a similar text: ‘Je me contentrai d’avertir généralement qu’on doit non seulement s’accuser d’actes consommés, mais encore des attouchements sensuels, des regards impurs, des paroles obscènes, surtout si l’on s’est plu à les proférer, et s’il a eu danger de scandale pour ceux qui les ont entendues. On s’imagine à tort que les actes seuls d’impudicité consommée doivent être accusés. Il faut de plus dévoiler au confesseur les mauvaises pensées auxquelles on a consenti.’ The general idea, advocated by Foucault, is indeed there.


Elias’ theory, Van Ussel has to change the traditional view on the history of sexuality in a twofold manner. First, the periodisation of sexual repression has to be changed. The reign of queen Victoria (1837-1901) is too late for an explanation which lays the emphasis on industrialisation (1705: Newcomen, the steam pump; 1733: Kay, the flying shuttle; 1735: Darby, cokes in the ferro-industries; 1785: Watt, the steam-engine). Consequently, Van Ussel has to look for other traces of sexual repression than those which are usually studied. He finds them in the campaign against masturbation which he traces back to the middle of the 18th century with the publication of the booklet *L’Onanisme* (1760) by the Genevan physician Tissot (1728-1797). This book was published in numerous editions (the last one in the 20th century!). For Van Ussel this evidences the existence of an ‘anti-sexual syndrome’ accompanying the development of Western capitalism.

Let us be aware of the peculiar psychological model introduced by Van Ussel. One would expect that an author who wants to analyse the link between capitalism and sexuality would concentrate his attention upon sexual problems in relation to property, marriage, legal offspring, number of children and problems of hygiene (which were particularly acute in those times wherein syphilis prevailed). However, Van Ussel focuses his research on other topics such as prudery, the split between the adult’s and children’s life, sex instruction and in particular, masturbation. For him, the 18th century anti-sexual syndrome is not immediately connected with procreation. Its aims much more at regulating sexual pleasure. A scrupulous citizen should have a stable system of self-control over sexual desires. The success of this endeavour to make masturbation culpable is a good test for this.

Essentially, Michel Foucault’s first book on the history of sexuality, *La Volonté de savoir* (1976), is an attempt to unmask the sexual liberation ideologies of the 1960s as a hidden continuation of an ongoing process of enslavement. It is also an implicit critique of the work of Van Ussel. According to Foucault, people got the illusion that the removal of sexual taboos by naming them would give them freedom. Whereas sexual matters had been wrapped in silence, people should now have the courage to speak about them. They should profess their sexual feelings and preferences. According to Foucault, this ideology is a continuation in disguise of traditional confession. And Foucault sneers at this ideology that promises freedom.

People are also trapped in another way: their sexual behaviour is supposed to be linked with a specific psychological feature. And here we meet what has already been foreshadowed in the discussion about *sodomia perfecta* and *imperfecta*, but it goes further. If De Liguori shifted his analysis from the specificity of the sexual act,

16. I wrote an article in Dutch about the understanding of those various editions, arguing that the fame of Tissot as a neurologist does not mean that his booklets on masturbations were taken seriously: P. Vandermeersch, ‘S.A. Tissot en de strijd tegen het onanisme: mythe of realiteit?’ *Documentatieblad Werkgroep Achtste Eeuw* 65-66 (1985) 173-193 (also on www.patrickvandermeersch.nl)
the anal penetration, to the choice of an adequate partner, Foucault will add that the sexual act will be linked with a special psychological type. The performer of sodomy will become a sodomite, a homosexual, a gay, and will get bit by bit an own social and cultural milieu to live in, with own periodicals, such as the weekly *Gai Pied*, a title created by Foucault himself. In a simplified way, one would say that sexual identities are constructed and become new forms of alienation. This statement will be eagerly accepted by the gender studies. But let us insist: in this first volume of *History of Sexuality*, Foucault deals with the construction of sexual identities in the nineteenth-twentieth century, and his theory on the matter is still seminal. He announced a series of books where he would develop his intuition more in detail:

1. La volonté de savoir (The will to knowledge)
2. La chair et le corps (the flesh and the body will now be published in February 2018 as Les aveux de la chair, the confession of the flesh)
3. La croisade des enfants (the crusade of the children)
4. La femme, la mère et l’hystérique (the woman, the mother and the hysteric)
5. Les pervers (the perverts)
6. Populations et races (populations and races)

This series of books will never appear. It was said that although Foucault had completed the second volume, he refused to have it published as he was not happy with the result. He accepted nevertheless the pre-publication of a chapter in the special issue of *Communications* with texts from the seminar on the history of sexuality directed by Philippe Ariès at the École des hautes études en sciences sociales in 1979-1980. Foucault deals with the spiritual guidance of the monks in the Egyptian desert we discussed above. He wrote following foreword:

This text is taken from the third volume of the *History of Sexuality*. Discussing with Philippe Ariès the general outline of this issue, I thought that my text would be in consonance with the other papers. It’s my opinion that the usual interpretation of the Christian sexual ethics has to be revised fundamentally; and that at the other hand the weight of the problem of masturbation has a completely different origine than the medical campaign against it in the eighteenth-nineteenth century.

---

17. The title ‘The gay foot’ can also be heard as ‘le guêpier’, ‘the horns’ nest’.
19. ‘Ce texte est extrait du troisième volume de l’*Histoire de la sexualité*. Après avoir consulté Philippe Ariès sur l’orientation générale du présent recueil, j’ai pensé que ce texte consonnait avec d’autres études. Il nous semble en effet que l’idée qu’on se fait d’ordinaire d’une éthique sexuelle chrétienne est à réviser profondément; et que d’autre part la valeur de la question de la masturbation a une toute autre origine que la campagne des médecins aux XVIIIe-XIXe siècles.’
As we know, the next published volumes of Foucault’s *History of Sexuality* deal with the Greeks and the Romans. We thus can expect that the volume that will available in February deals with the Christian tradition. Let us hope that he does not only focus on early Christian writers, the classic ones, like Tertullianus and Augustine, but also on the winding paths of Christian morals since modernity and the rise of what is often too simply labelled as secularism.

There are two essential reasons for hoping that. First: Foucault’s early works, just preceding his studies on sex, are based upon his creed that we are embedded in structures of knowledge, épistêmès. They can suddenly shift and our ways of looking at things are carried away by those shifts. If we want to acquire a little bit freedom, we should find the weak points in the web thrown upon us by those épistêmès. We hope to learn how Michel Foucault matches his new long term perspective with his previous epistemology. Second: the history of confession shows us how the cultural evolution of the West produced individuals with individual consciences. What is the future of this in a secular world and what is the link with sexuality?

Surely, the praxis of confession took place in a religious framework; God was still present behind the confessor one saw behind the grid. But the theory of the moral theology was mostly a purely secular one. Catholic moral theology was not stolen from heaven. Thomas Aquinas has stated this in a radical, theoretical, way in the IaIIæ of his *Summa*, and the moral theologians grounded their appreciation of the details of sexual life - and of other aspects of life - in ‘natural law’. Of course, as the life of everyone was conditioned by God’s creation, for a long time there has been a religious wrapping of profane moral reasoning. But today, in our post-Christian world, how to ground individual moral conscience? How can we delineate the psychological contours of its correct functioning?

I have the impression that the phase of deconstruction is not over and that uneasiness, if not anxiety, characterises those questions. At one hand, one is struck by the fact sexuality has become for another time a touchy matter. At the other, militant atheists have to make unsound presuppositions how religion works in order to make their claims meaningful. Meanwhile, sexual prudery and religious simplism is on the way back, often in dangerous outfits. Transparency is hard to achieve in those matters.

We would need a Foucault, still alive, for elucidating those questions.