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Heterodox Religion and Post-Atheism: Bataille / Klossowski/ Foucault

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Abstract

This essay seeks to delineate a heterodox religious hermeneutics developing from the work of Georges Bataille and Pierre Klossowski through to the later work of Michel Foucault (in his unpublished *Confessions of the Flesh*). Each of these thinkers can be seen as heavily influenced by Nietzsche, while nonetheless deriving nonatheistic conclusions from his proclamation of the 'death of God'. The interconnections between the work of the earlier Bataille and Klossowski and the later Foucault are traced through an analysis of Foucault's genealogy of his own intellectual development, where he pays explicit homage to his precursors. In effect, these readings provide an alternative reading of the genealogy of the postmodern as such. However, the particular focus of the essay is on how, at a more micro-level of interpretation, the analyses of each of these three thinkers provides a reintroduction of late antique or medieval metaphysics, now redeployed in a very different intellectual context. The heterodox readings of the religious on the one side, and of Nietzsche and Sade on the other, provide a fascinating possibility of rapprochement between postmodern philosophy and what Foucault tentatively calls 'spirituality'. However, this possibility is at odds with the more recently vaunted option of the phenomenology of religion. These analyses also remain simultaneously inimical to philosophical atheism.

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1 Introduction

> The death of God does not terminate in an atheism: it is the remains of
> Golgotha: it is definitive, it continues   *Pierre Klossowski*

Although the epithet 'post-modern' is generally first applied to the group of French

thinkers who began writing in the late 1950s (Foucault, Deleuze, Derrida), it is clear

that an earlier group of French writers had a formative influence on this later

movement. In particular, the literary and philosophical works of Georges Bataille and

Pierre Klossowski appear to have anticipated many of the later so-called 'post-

modern' themes. This is nowhere more evident than in the theme of the 'religious' or

the 'sacred' which has in recent times become one of the most important subjects for

Continentalist thought and writing, albeit almost exclusively within the confines of

neo-phenomenological approaches. This paper will seek to address the importance of

the meditation on the theme of the 'religious' by both Bataille and Klossowski and its subsequent influence on the later Foucault's interest in the themes of religious confession and Christian selfhood.

In the case of Bataille, the theorising concerning religion in his philosophical texts (most notably *Inner Experience* [Bataille 1998] and *Theory of Religion* [Bataille 1990]) is also reflected (or refracted) in the theme of the sacred running throughout his novels and poems (most especially *Madame Edwarda* [Bataille 1996]). Bataille's concern with the religious goes back to his earliest years, his earliest known text being a eulogy to a French Cathedral. Pierre Klossowski's theoretical work in the 1930s and 1940s was also crucial in the reappraisal of the relation between philosophy and theology. His pivotal text on Nietzsche (*Nietzsche and the Vicious Circle*) [Klossowski 1997] highlights an implicit religiosity at the heart of one of history's most apparently secular thinkers. Although not published until 1969, this text collects earlier essays from the 1960s while also going back to work which Klossowski had been outlining since 1937. In particular here also one could cite his 1957 lecture 'Nietzsche, polytheism and parody', which is explicitly praised by Deleuze as renewing the interpretation of Nietzsche in France (cited by Daniel Smith, Klossowski 1997, xii). Perhaps the most important Klossowski text for our purposes however is his 1947 book *Sade My Neighbour* (Klossowski 1999) which directly addresses the question of the religious and also the theme of the relation between the rationalism of modernity and the mysticism of the medieval period, a consistent topic in Klossowski's *oeuvre*.

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My paper will thus seek to foreground the importance of both Bataille and Klossowski for an understanding of the recent turn towards the 'religious' in post-modern philosophy and literature. One of the least known and appraised aspects of this renewed interest in the theme of religion is found in Foucault's later work. For Foucault, reflection on the historical genealogy of philosophical paradigms points to the contingency of these paradigms and towards the creation of new paradigms of thought, what he terms 'technologies' of thought. It also allows us to see that what we often consider to be new or radical 'modes' of philosophising are often merely the repetition in naivety of rather stultified and traditional thoughts. I will specifically address Foucault's analysis of Christian thought in his later work, most especially those fragmentary texts and lectures which make up the context for the proposed fourth volume of his *History of Sexuality*, which he entitled 'Confessions of the Flesh'. (Foucault 1999) This Foucauldian interest in Christian philosophy did not arrive *ex nihilo*. His works demonstrate a consistent interest in Christianity and in the phenomenon of religion more generally from the early 1960s through the 1970s and up until his most sustained treatment of these issues in his final works of the early 1980s. However, one significant aspect of his later treatment of Christian thought is that it represents a methodological and philosophical break with his earlier work, moving from a more structuralist interpretation to an approach focused on the technologies of self-formation. His work on the *History of Sexuality* is paradigmatic here and it is instructive that he regarded the unpublished fourth volume as the most important aspect of this work. As we will see, this importance derives for Foucault from his analysis there of the Christian development of the concept of 'self' and 'subjectivity'.

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2   The Genealogy of Foucault's Later Thought

The later French thinker who most explicitly owes and pays his debts to the work of

Bataille and Klossowski is Michel Foucault. Significantly, for our purposes, this debt

is specifically in relation to the thematic of 'religion'. Foucault's later work, for

example his unpublished fourth volume of the *History of Sexuality* entitled

Confessions of the Flesh, (Foucault 1999) takes the phenomenon of the 'religious' as

its central concern. Here, Foucault's meditation upon the religious seems to derive

from two alternative sources. One source is the ethnography of Claude Lévi-Strauss

and Georges Dumézil, while the other source is the avant-garde writing of Bataille,

Klossowski and Maurice Blanchot. As Foucault clarifies in the interview, 'Who are

you, Professor Foucault?' in 1967:

> For a long time, there was a sort of unresolved conflict in me between a
> passion for Blanchot and Bataille, and on the other hand the interest I
> nurtured for more positive studies, like those of Dumézil and Lévi-
> Strauss, for example… these two directions had as their only common
> denominator the religious question….. (Foucault 1999, 98)

To simplify here we might say that, from the ethnographic studies, Foucault inherited

a more 'functionalist' approach to religion (and this certainly clearly distinguishes his

work on religion from, for example, recent phenomenological appropriations of the

religious). It is clear that in his later work on what he refers to as 'Christian

confession', Foucault develops his earlier structuralist methodology into a focus on

the 'self', a bottom-up rather than a top-down approach, but this analysis still focuses

on a functioning self rather than a phenomenological self. That is, for Foucault, the

self is more a construction than an ontological discovery. This then would explain the

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influence of Lévi-Strauss and Dumézil. Foucault's debt to his avant-garde precursors, Bataille, Blanchot and Klossowski, is however more enigmatic.

From Bataille, and Klossowski in particular, Foucault inherits a fascination for the ancient world and ancient philosophy and religion. Indeed it seems clear that the debt which the Continental philosophical tradition in general owes to Bataille and Klossowski, with regard to the reintroduction of the problematic of ancient and medieval thought, has been vastly underestimated. Most especially, this debt is with reference to a certain complicating of the position of late antique and medieval thought. Klossowski's foregrounding of Gnostic thinking and Bataille's constant interrogation of medieval mysticism problematise the simple exclusion of medieval thought as the 'handmaiden of theology'. It doesn't seem far-fetched to conclude that Foucault's own sustained analysis of Stoicism and the Early Church Fathers owes something to the avant-garde thematics.

I want to develop this enquiry through looking at how Foucault himself thematises this influence on his work in two essays, 'A Preface to Transgression' (on Bataille) [Foucault 1998] and 'The Prose of Actaeon' (on Klossowski). [ibid] Foucault begins his analysis of Bataille with a reference to Bataille's writing on medieval Christian mysticism in his text *Eroticism*: "never did sexuality enjoy a more immediately natural understanding and never did it know a greater 'felicity of expression' than in the Christian world of fallen bodies and of sin" (ibid, 57). Bataille's work on early Christian mysticism, and in particular its conception of sexuality, is thus being prioritised here by Foucault. This reference significantly anticipates Foucault's own

analysis of early Christian mysticism and exactly its relation to sexuality and the sexual self, twenty years later ('A Preface to Transgression' was written in 1963, just after Bataille's death). Another reference later in the text to Kant is also instructive. According to Foucault, Kant's philosophy created an 'opening' in Western philosophy, to the extent that he offered a critique of metaphysics and a critique of the limits of reason. Nonetheless, this opening was subsequently closed (according to Foucault) by Kant himself, insofar as "he [Kant] ultimately relegated all critical investigations to an anthropological question". (ibid, 63)

Whatever we might think of this interpretation of Kant, it is clear that, from Foucault's point of view, Bataille's philosophy represents a re-opening of what Kant sought to close. Bataille's work introduces what Foucault refers to as a principle of 'contestation', (ibid, 61/62) a philosophical principle *par excellence* which Bataille defines in *Inner Experience* as "having the power to implicate (and to question) everything without possible respite" (quoted ibid, 62). This principle of contestation, so to speak, *transgresses* the late Kantian limit of philosophy and thought. Bataille's use of this principle of contestation also seems to maintain, according to Foucault, some enigmatic relationship to Christian mysticism (although, in this text, the relation is merely suggestive).

As with his analysis of Bataille, what is initially striking for Foucault in Klossowski's work is that he 'revives a long lost experience' (Foucault 1999, 75). And, again as with Bataille, chronologically, Klossowski's thought returns us to a late antique world of metaphysics, that of the Gnostics and the Manichees. While much recent work in

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this area has cast new light on the original texts and contexts of this period, Klossowski's work can nonetheless be seen as seminal. Foucault highlights Klossowski's crucial theme of the 'double' (ibid, 75), the doubling of all the binary oppositions which structure late antique thought: God and Satan, good and evil, finitude and infinitude amongst others. "But what, asks Foucault, if on the contrary, the Other were the Same? And the Temptation were not one episode of the great antagonism, but the meagre insinuation of the Double? What if the duel took place inside a mirror's space?" (ibid, 75). For Foucault, the importance of Klossowski's work lies in its complication and subversion of metaphysical dualism, most especially as this relates to the Gnostic or (sometimes) Christian dualism between God and Satan and good and evil. But this subversion is less an extrinsic attack on Christian thought and more a development of a repressed logic within Christian philosophy itself. As Foucault observes: "there is a vast range of Christian experience well familiar with this danger: the temptation to experience the temptation in the mode of the indiscernible" (ibid, 75). Written in 1964, this essay on Klossowski looks forward to some of the main themes of 'Confessions of the Flesh'.

Some commentators, most notably James Millar, have sought to interpret the concern with the religious in Bataille and Klossowski as deriving from a kind of neo-Christian mysticism. Other writers, such as Jeremy Carrette, have presented this attempted assimilation as misguided, as deriving from a mixture of "theological naivety .. [and] popular misconception" (Carrette, in Foucault 1999, 18). Rather, what is taking place in Bataille and Klossowski is rather according to Carrette a "multi-layered reading and re-organisation of religious ideas which demands careful scrutiny" (ibid). In the

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next two sections, I want to look at how we might develop this insight through specific readings of Bataille and Klossowski. I will return to a more detailed analysis of Foucault's work on religion in the final sections of the essay.

3   On Bataille's Sacred

One of the most interesting interpretations of Bataille's work from our point of view is one expressed by Klossowski himself, and this reading sheds light on the context of Klossowski's own *oeuvre*. Commenting on the lingering but unacknowledged influence of the Russian thinker Leon Chestov on Bataille's reading of Nietzsche, Klossowski comments: "the death of God does not terminate in an atheism: it is the remains of Golgotha: it is definitive, it continues" (quoted Surya 2002, 63). The Nietzschean influence on Bataille and Klossowski, and its direct contribution to their foregrounding of the religious and the sacred, cannot be underestimated, but their readings of Nietzsche (singular as they are) share a certain heterodoxy. As Michel Surya has commented, Bataille's Nietzsche is perhaps "not very accurate", it is a Christian Nietzsche, a Pascalian Nietzsche (Surya 2002, 61), although by the same token, in this relationship, Christianity is also Nietzschified (ibid). It is in this sense we can perhaps say that, for both Bataille and Klossowski, while there is a death of God, there is not, at least not necessarily, an atheism.

Bataille's text *Theory of Religion* (Bataille 1990) shows a strong Nietzschean influence and here Bataille is keen to extricate the phenomenon of the religious from its mere Christianisation. In particular, Bataille focuses on what he terms the 'positing of a Supreme Being', (Bataille 1990, 33) which he interprets as an "impoverishment".

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(ibid, 34) In his analysis of this phenomenon, Bataille would appear to be also implicitly critiquing pre-Christian concepts of the Supreme Being, whether of the Neo-Platonists or the Judaic tradition. "There is doubtless, in the positing of a supreme being, a determination to define a value that is greater than any other. But this desire to increase results in a diminution". (ibid, 34) Bataille regards such monotheism as a diminution of the force of the sacred. "The sacred is that prodigious effervescence of life that, for the sake of duration, the order of things holds in check… The sacred is exactly comparable to the flame that destroys the wood by consuming it. It is that opposite of a thing which an unlimited fire is; it spreads, it radiates heat and light, it suddenly inflames and blinds in turn". (ibid, 53) This anarchic religious or sacred force is reduced, through more conventional religious orthodoxy, to the orderly point of a Supreme Being. This of course, for Bataille, is not exclusively a theological issue but also relates to the whole socio-political and moral infrastructure which is attendant on monotheism. The sacred is translated into a moral and political set of commandments (and here again we can see the analogy with Nietzsche's *Genealogy of Morals*). [Nietzsche 1967]

But in clearly rejecting a certain tendency within Christianity, indeed one might say its very foundation as a theism and its positing of a Supreme Being, Bataille is also paradoxically drawing close to another aspect of Christianity itself. Early in his life, Bataille had become aware, he once said, of his raison d'être: "my interest in this world was to write and develop a paradoxical philosophy". (Surya 2002, 16) His relation to Christianity is paradoxical insofar as, while rejecting its diminution of the force of the sacred, he also recognises a no less actual aspect of Christianity. Here it is

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less a question of the Christian God and more an issue of Christian morals, or rather anti-morals, encapsulated in the concept of *felix culpa*, or "happy sin". Sin for Bataille is a necessity of Christianity: "Perhaps Christianity is even fundamentally the pressing demand for crime, the demand for the horror that in a sense it needs in order to forgive". [quoted in Surya, 460] Paradoxically, again, this is precisely what distances Bataille from Nietzsche. Whereas Nietzsche in *The Genealogy of Morals* sees Christian sin, most especially as evidenced in the concept of 'evil', as a symptom of 'ressentiment' and lack of health, Bataille rather sees it as endemic to the very idea of the sacred and the religious. Significantly, in his early text 'The Old Mole' (Bataille 1985, 34), Bataille comments on what he sees as a misguided 'idealism' in Nietzsche's work. This is also what distinguishes Bataille's concern with 'debauchery' from Sade's emphasis on 'libertinage' (although as we shall see Klossowski's interpretation of Sade brings the latter closer to 'debauchery'). [cf. Surya 2002, 104ff] The anthropological work of Marcel Mauss and Emile Durkheim on pre-Christian society is undoubtedly also an influence on Bataille here.

There would be a lot more to say about Bataille in this context — the religious is one of his central themes. However, before addressing Klossowski, I will refer briefly to just two more points. In the first case, Bataille's concern with the religious is also fundamentally a concern with the phenomenon of death. Bataille is certainly one of those figures whom one could refer to as having had an 'early death awareness'. Indeed, he sees it as one of his major aims as a writer to re-introduce the sense of death, which has been lost through the diminution of the sacred. In his journal *Acephalé* in 1937, he states: "No one thinks any longer that the reality of a communal

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life — which is to say, human existence — depends on the sharing of nocturnal terrors and on the kind of ecstatic spasms spread by death". (Surya 2002, 243) The interweaving of the religious and of death is a consistent theme throughout his work; it is perhaps most eloquently and vociferously expressed in his early pornographic novel, *The Story of the Eye.* (Bataille 2001) The very pornography of this work also develops an obsessive sub-theme in Bataille — the relationship between sex and the sacred and, by extension, the fatal affinity between sex and death.

Second, there is a significant issue in Bataille's work concerning the relation between the sacred and the political, most especially as this relates to the question of Fascism. Parallels have been drawn by some commentators between Bataille's emphasis on the 'sacred' in the late 1930s and the contemporaneous emphasis on certain forms of 'enthusiasm' in Fascism. However, suffice to say, in this limited context, that Bataille was very much aware of these parallels but was precisely developing his interest in the 'sacred' for contrary reasons. His creation of and work for the group Contre-Attaque bears this out (cf. Surya 2002, 218ff). In re-invoking the religious and the sacred, Bataille is hoping to cultivate the very resources employed by Fascism to combat the latter: "We intend in our turn to use for our benefit the weapons created by Fascism, which has been able to use humanity's fundamental aspirations for affective exaltation and fanaticism". Indeed, Bataille was one of the first and only thinkers of the period to address the problem of the 'fascination' which Fascism exerted; here one can mention his seminal 1935 essay, "On the Psychological Structure of Fascism". (Bataille 1985)

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4   'Under the Mask of Atheism': Klossowski on the Religious

Pierre Klossowski maintained a close, life-long friendship with Bataille and the themes of their work consistently intertwine. This is nowhere more apparent than in the theme of the 'religious' which, as with Bataille, occupies much of Klossowski's writing. That said, there are different emphases in each thinker's work. There is for example a more explicit concern with early Greek myth in Klossowski's work, and its relation to the sacred. Klossowski also shows an abiding concern with late antique Gnosticism. However, the commonalities are striking; the disavowal of orthodox religion after being young seminarians, the emphasis on heterodoxy and heresy, the reflection on the problematic relation between the pagan and the Christian. There is also a significant theme of the relation between the sacred and eroticism or sexuality in both their work, and this becomes most vehemently expressed in their respective literary work. These are themes which I can only suggestively leave in suspension here.

My focus with regard to Klossowski's work will be on his 1947 essay "Under the Mask of Atheism", which is included as part of his text *Sade, My Neighbour*. (Klossowski 1991) In a highly idiosyncratic and original reading of Sade, Klossowski argues that the Sadean system which appears focused on the concepts of 'Nature' and 'perpetual motion' is, in fact, a transposition of themes connected with the religious: "The terms *Nature* and *perpetual motion* have served only to transfer the mystery and incomprehensibility of God into metaphysical entities, without resolving or exhausting that mystery of being which is the possibility of evil and of nothingness". (Klossowski 1991, 99) Far from being the ultimate modernist, Sade is rather a pre-

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modern, invoking concepts and experiences which constitute a re-awakening of the most ancient sources: "In the soul of this libertine great lord of the century of Enlightenment, very old mental structures are reawakened; it is impossible not to recognise the whole ancient system of the Manichean gnosis, the visions of Basilides, Valentinus, and especially Marcion". (Klossowski 1991, 100)

Under the mask of being an atheist modernist, in fact of being *the* atheist modernist, Sade is rather an opponent of modernism. Klossowski compares Sade to Baudelaire, figures looking back from modernity to pre-modern themes, and also looking forward to post-modernity, to the demise of modernity; caught temporally in what Lyotard has referred to as the "future anterior". Sade has been so misinterpreted because he has been looked at exclusively through a modernist lens. Judged by the values of rational morality and social conscience representative of modernity, (ibid, 108) Sade's work can only be misread. As Klossowski said of Bataille, if Sade is proclaiming the death of God, he is not for all that proclaiming a secular atheism.

Far from it. "Everything in Sade will thus predispose him, in these last years of the century of Voltaire, to speak the language of a latent Jansenism". (ibid, 106) Developing a logic of religion we have already seen expressed in Bataille, Klossowski foregrounds the concept of 'sin' as central to his analysis. (ibid, 108ff) The key to understanding Sade, according to Klossowski, is the medieval Christian conception of *delectatio morosa* or 'morose delectation' (also 'morbid pleasure'). (ibid, 112) In Klossowski's analysis, this concept serves an analogous function to Bataille's use of the concept of *felix culpa*. "Morose delectation consists in that movement of the soul

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by which it bears itself voluntarily towards images of forbidden carnal or spiritual acts in order to linger in contemplation of them". (ibid, 113) To this extent, although Sade appears to be transgressing religious mores through his debauched characterisations, on Klossowski's interpretation, he is in fact manifesting his true faith.

In an important Appendix (ibid, 137ff) to *Sade, My Neighbour*, Klossowski clarifies the genealogy of this faith in sin through a discussion of Carpocrates, whom he describes as a 'Gnostic sectarian'. (ibid, 138) The Carpocratian sect of the Gnostics gave an especial emphasis to Matthew 5:25-26; "agree with thine adversary". (ibid, 138) On their interpretation, this passage involved an acceptance of the adversary of sin: "crime is a tribute paid to life, they say, a tribute demanded by the creator of this life. It is necessary, then, that the soul delivers itself over to sin as soon as temptation presents itself". (ibid, 138) The Sadean crimes against humanity are thus interpreted by Klossowski as intrinsically religious acts; they are perpetuated not against the sacred but precisely in the name of the sacred against the rational morality and social solidarity of modernity. Sade thus becomes an unlikely advocate of religiosity and the sacred, albeit in an unorthodox key and under the 'mask of atheism'.

As with my analysis of Bataille, I have had to be very selective in my focus on Klossowski's concern with the religious. It is arguable that the phenomenon of the 'religious' is Klossowski's most obsessive theme, running all through his novels and critical works, and his analysis and emphasis is different in different contexts. I have chosen *Sade, My Neighbor*, because it represents two of Klossowski's most insistent suggestions: first, that modernity is haunted and ultimately defeated and torn apart by

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the pre-modern. And second, that the subtleties and subversions of the Gnostic philosophical religion anticipate the reconfiguration of philosophy, after and beyond modernity. This reconfiguration of philosophy was of course undertaken, amongst others, by Michel Foucault, and I will turn now to an analysis of Foucault's later work on Christian technologies of the self.

5   'On the Hermeneutics of The Self'

Two lectures given in the United States in 1980, jointly entitled 'On the beginning of the hermeneutics of the self,' make up some of the most important notes for Foucault's projected fourth volume of the *History of Sexuality*, which was to be entitled 'Confessions of the Flesh'. (Foucault 1999) Early in this text, Foucault clarifies his reasons for addressing such an apparently obscure topic as the Christian self (although some might argue that what he is really addressing here is the concept of the Christian 'soul'):

> In order to justify the attention I am giving to what is seemingly so specialised a subject, let me take a step back for a moment. All that, after all, is for me only a means that I will use to take on a much more general theme — that is, the genealogy of the modern subject. [ibid, 159]

Foucault highlights what he sees as the context, immediately preceding the Second World War, and immediately after it, which generated such an exclusive concern with the philosophy of the subject. Continental Europe he says was dominated by a 'philosophy of the subject'. In France this stemmed first from the Husserlian influence, through the *Cartesian Meditations* and the *Crisis*. Second, it had an institutional basis in what Foucault sees as the Cartesian logic of the French university

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system. And third, the emphasis on the subject is generated from the specifics of the 'political conjuncture', (ibid, 159) whereby the absurdity of war puts the responsibility for meaning onto the individual (and here no doubt Foucault is thinking most especially of Sartre's *Existentialism and Humanism*). [Sartre 1980] Developing this historical survey, Foucault outlines the two main responses to this hegemony of subjectivity. First, most especially in logical positivism, an attempt to assert an objective knowledge over against this subjectivism. And on the other side, most especially in structuralism, an attempt to neutralise subjectivity within a network of relations.

Crucially, Foucault wants to mark his difference from both of these perspectives and to assert his own distinctive philosophical methodology:

> I have tried to get out of the philosophy of the subject through a genealogy of this subject, by studying the constitution of the subject across history which has led us to the modern concept of the self. (Foucault 1999, 160)

But, here in 1980, Foucault also wants to mark a change in his own methodology in this regard. Whereas his most famous historical and archealogical analyses have been concerned to show how subjects became objects, and objects of domination and control (for example in the *Birth of the Clinic* and *Discipline and Punish*), Foucault is now inverting this analysis by looking at "those forms of understanding which the subject creates about himself, those forms of self-understanding" (ibid, 161). One might refer to these rather than processes of objectification as processes of *subjectification* or *subjectivisation*. Foucault also refers to these as 'technologies'

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(ibid, 161) of the self, techniques of self-understanding. Moreover, this analysis is not to be simply academic or theoretical, but what he refers to as 'political' (ibid, 161):

> This would be a theoretical analysis which has, at the same time, a political dimension. By this word 'political dimension' I mean an analysis that relates to what we are willing to accept in our world, to accept, to refuse, and to change, both in ourselves and in our circumstances (ibid, 161).

This, if you like, is Foucault's justification for addressing such an apparently esoteric and conservative topic as late antique Christian confession. It should also be pointed out that his understanding of such 'confession' is hardly orthodox. Nonetheless, according to Foucault, the development of a late antique (or what he refers to as 'early medieval') Christian understanding of the self introduces a profound change in the way the 'self' is viewed and this is have great significance for the development of the concept of the 'self' in succeeding Western history. So as to clarify this specific importance of the Christian idea of self, Foucault distinguishes its import from what he interprets as the Hellenistic idea of self (and Foucault also seems to consider this Hellenistic conception of self consistent in its broad outlines with earlier Greek concepts of self). In the first case, this difference relates to different philosophical aims. As we will see, for Foucault, the primary aims of the Christian discipline or 'government' of self refer to the obligation to 'examine one's conscience' and to 'make a confession of self', whether before God or before one's community. (ibid, 163) In contrast, the aim of Greek selfhood is rather directed at the eudaimonistic life, to live a happy and balanced life. (ibid, 163) (it is clear that this interpretation is more easily applicable to Aristotelian and Hellenistic selfhood than Platonic) At the same time, Foucault recognises that one finds already, before Christianity, the 'elaboration

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of techniques for discovering and formulating the truth about oneself'. (ibid, 164)

Here, Foucault focuses briefly on some examples from the texts of Seneca. The

upshot of this analysis, for Foucault, is that while a certain confession of the self and a

certain interrogation of the self takes place here, it is of a very specific kind. It is not

concerned with foregrounding any concept of what we might term the 'true self', the

self which might lie behind appearances. Rather, it is concerned with helping the self

to remember the "rules of conduct that he had learned", (ibid, 165) and here Foucault

gives the example of the Stoic exercises, such as the examination of all the evil things

which could happen in life or the enumeration each morning of the tasks to be

accomplished during the day. (ibid, 166) It is here then that Foucault can delineate the

crucial differences separating the Stoic or Hellenistic idea of self and the Christian

conception of self:

> The [Hellenistic] self is not something that has to be discovered or
> deciphered as a very obscure text. You see that the task is not to put in
> the light what would be the most obscure part of our selves. The self
> has, on the contrary, not to be discovered but to be constituted, to be
> constituted through the force of truth….. In the Christian technologies
> of the self, the problem is to discover what is hidden inside the self; the
> self is like a text or like a book that we have to decipher, and not
> something which has to be constructed by the superposition, the
> superimposition, of the will and the truth. (ibid, 169)

Foucault develops his analysis of the Christian self in a detailed discussion of the

works of the Early Church Fathers, making reference to Jerome, Tertullian and

Cyprian amongst others, with a particular focus on the work of John Cassian (again, it

is worth pointing out here that Foucault's conception of the Christian ascesis involves

a certain active interpretation; it might be countered for example that Christians do not

make a 'confession of self' the aim of their spiritual exercises but rather the

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dedication of oneself to God). It is not until Foucault starts to discuss the relation between the self and sexuality that Augustine rather appropriately and inevitably appears. At this stage of the discussion, Foucault wants to highlight two peculiar aspects of the Christian concept of self, as these are manifested in 'penitential rites' and 'monastic life' respectively. (ibid, 171) In the case of the 'penitential rites', Foucault notes how in the early years of the Church, 'penance' is not an act but a "status". (ibid, 171) That is, a Christian who has committed one or several serious sins becomes subject to a number of prohibitions (such as fasting obligations, rules about clothing etc) but is nonetheless given a chance to reintegrate into the community by means of such penance. What interests Foucault in this drama of penance is the procedure or rite which is known as *exomologesis*, which takes place at the moment of reconciliation of the penitent. Tertullian gives a lucid description of what such a rite involves:

> The penitent wears a hair shirt and ashes. He is wretchedly dressed. He is taken by the hand and led into the church. He prostrates himself before the widows and the priests. He hangs on the skirts of their garments. He kisses their knees. (ibid, 171)

For Foucault this dramatic self-revelation of the penitent manifests a crucial difference in its conception of self from the earlier Hellenistic concepts. Here, *exomologesis* serves as what Foucault terms a 'theatrical representation of the sinner willing his own death as sinner'. (ibid, 171) Unlike the Stoic notion of an affirmed and self-sufficient self, the Christian self is rather affirmed in its very renunciation, in the refusal of the self, the breaking off from the self. Undoubtedly, Foucault is here again taking certain liberties with the conventional interpretation which would stress

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atonement and the need for pardon from God's for one's sins. However, his own response would be that this conventionalism masks the true philosophical radicality at work in this context. To this end, Foucault synopsises this technology of self in the formula; *ego non sum ego* ('I am not what I am'). (ibid, 173) This hugely important rendering of the Christian ascesis appears to be Foucault's own interpretation of the repressed inner logic of early Christianity. It of course looks forward to the later Eckhartian notions of 'detachment' and 'annihilation of self', not to mention the postmodernist deconstruction of selfhood.

The second innovation in the technologies of self introduced by early Christianity is described by Foucault through recourse to the practice of monastic communities. The highest aim of each monk is to contemplate God. But significantly, in order to achieve true contemplation, the monk must be concerned not simply with how his actions represent the good, but also and more importantly with his thoughts and the images which come before his mind, because it is through images and thoughts that one is turned away from contemplation. Through a focus on the work of the late antique thinker John Cassian, Foucault highlights how a whole, new discipline of thought is introduced during this period. For the first time, according to Foucault, thoughts are considered as objects of analysis in their own right. The monk must seek out the genealogy of each thought, deciphering pure thoughts from negative thoughts (like a moneychanger who must verify the authenticity of their coinage). To further complicate matters, according to Cassian, one must adopt an attitude of suspicion to each thought because there is always the danger that thoughts can be 'secretly altered,

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disguised in their substance' (ibid, 177) by the Devil who is perceived as a presence within the self.

Foucault's analysis of the Christian concept of self thus highlights two significant innovations; first, the conception of authentic selfhood as a renunciation of self (*ego non sum ego*) and second, the conception of a discipline of thought which seeks to analyse thoughts as thoughts rather than in terms of what they refer to. More enigmatically here, the idea of a 'devil' within the mind (a kind of 'otherness' which lurks within) also seems to point to some interesting enigmatic possibilities, which I will leave in abeyance here. Undoubtedly, this Foucauldian reading is complicated if one accepts the Neo-Platonic influence on these early Christian texts which would appear to suggest that Foucault has occluded the realist basis of the Christian disciplines in favour of a more self-oriented approach. However, it is arguable that Foucault might also point to a rather underemphasised transcendentalism in Platonism which is here reappearing in the early Christian texts, and which seems to be at odds with the supposed doctrine of realism. This, however, is too large an issue to address in any detail here. To conclude, I want to take a brief look at what Foucault says about the relation between this Christian hermeneutics of the self and the sexual self.

6 'Sexuality and Solitude' and 'The Battle for Chastity'

In two lectures which were to form part of the 'Confessions of the Flesh' text, 'Sexuality and Solitude' and 'The Battle for Chastity' (written in 1980 and 1982 respectively), (Foucault 1999) Foucault seeks to draw connections between the Christian hermeneutics of the self and the Christian concept of the sexual self.

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Initially, Foucault is interested in complicating what he sees as a certain historical schema which is applied to the genealogy of sexual mores. The most obvious example of this schema would seem to be Nietzsche's *On the Genealogy of Morality* (although this is not explicitly mentioned by Foucault). This genealogy starts by positing the Greek and Roman worlds as periods of free sexual expression, followed by the second stage of prohibitive Christianity (a saying no to pleasure, no to sex) and then a continuation and development of this repressive morality through the sixteenth century bourgeoisie. One final stage which is often added here, notes Foucault, is the late nineteenth century freeing up of taboo through Freud and others.

Foucault's concern here is to complicate this rather simplistic schema by first pointing to the fact that many of the principles which Christianity is supposed to have introduced – for example, the principle of monogamy, the idea of sex as reproduction rather than pleasure and the general suspicion of sexual pleasure per se, had in fact already been introduced in pre-Christian society and philosophy. Foucault refers to the Stoic way of life but one could no doubt look further back here to the Platonic suspicion and extirpation of the body (most notably in the *Phaedo*). It is also significant that, in at least one respect, Christianity rejects this suspicion of sexuality. Augustine (alone amongst the Early Church Fathers) sees sex and sexuality as an intrinsic and harmonious part of life before the Fall. Unlike the other Church Fathers, and indeed many earlier Greek thinkers, who see sex as intrinsically dangerous and disordered, Augustine rather sees this sexual disorder as an effect of the Fall rather than of sexuality itself. In an important passage of *The City of God* (book 14, chapter 3) Augustine makes this clear:

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> Those who imagine that the ills of the soul derive from the body are
> mistaken….the corruption of the body, which weighs down the soul, is
> not the cause of the first sin, but its punishment. And it was not the
> corruptible flesh that made the soul sinful; it was the sinful soul that
> made the flesh corruptible. (Augustine 1972, 14:3)

Augustine thus looks forward to a resurrected and immortal body which returns to its original (sexual) harmony. Complicating the rather linear (Nietzschean) schema of sexual mores also allows us, according to Foucault, to recognise what actually is introduced by Christianity in terms of the sexual self. Whereas the Christian sexual code was merely "a piece of pagan ethics inserted into Christianity", the real innovation takes place with regard to the experience, the phenomenology of oneself as a sexual being. Here we can see John Cassian's discipline of thought directed specifically at sexuality. The primary question of the Christian sexual self becomes not 'how should I act sexually?' but 'how should I *think* sexually'? The Christians, so to speak, start to have sex in the head. Undoubtedly, the genealogy of this rigorous psychology of sex derived from the context within which the monastic community found itself. Given that monks had taken a vow of celibacy, at least in principle they weren't to be concerned with acting sexually. But this still left the issue of how to experience one's own sexuality, the question of auto-eroticism.

Christianity here introduces, according to Foucault, a 'new relation between sex and subjectivity'. (Foucault 1999, 186)   Whereas the Stoic notion of *apatheia* was concerned with the regulation of the self in terms of an external set of rules, the Christian focus on the sexual self leads to a process of what Foucault terms 'interiorisation'. (ibid, 126) This is exemplified, for example, in Augustine's

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discussion of male sexuality. Whereas the emphasis in much of earlier Greek thought, and also in Early Christian thinkers such as Clement of Alexandria, was on moderating sexual intercourse, the issue now becomes one of the sexual relation to oneself. From a male perspective, as Foucault notes, the issue is no longer one of 'penetration' but of 'erection'. (ibid, 186) The famous gesture of Adam covering his genitals with a fig leaf is, as Foucault notes, interpreted by Augustine as being a result of his sexual organs moving themselves without his consent. This move towards 'interiorisation' is also the reason why the issue of the 'auto-erotic' became such a perennial obsession for Christian morality. For Foucault, however, this is an issue which extends well beyond intra-Christian concern in that it was to have a formative influence on the development of the Western concept of self and subjectivity.

7   Towards a Conclusion: Heterodox Religion and Post-Atheism

Philosophical and in particular phenomenological approaches to religion have in recent times given witness to an increased interest in and respect for the religious. The work of Jean-Luc Marion (Marion 1998) is the obvious reference point here, alongside the thinking of Emmanuel Levinas (Levinas 1981) and the later work of Jacques Derrida. (Derrida 2002) As I have suggested in this essay, Foucault's last work on Christianity in his unpublished fourth volume of the history of sexuality, entitled *Confessions of the Flesh,* (Foucault 1999) is another instance of this tendency, albeit a rather earlier example. Moreover, Foucault's focus on the technologies of Christian religion can trace a direct genealogy back to the yet earlier explorations of Bataille and Klossowski.

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There are of course clear differences in the approaches of each of these thinkers. Indeed, in each of these cases, there is no one self-identical approach to the topic taken, even within their own work. Perhaps more than the work of most philosophers, our three case studies represent acutely self-differentiated, even self-contradictory, analyses and results. Nonetheless, it is possible in summary to delineate significant concerns in each or all of these thinkers which are worthy of further reflection and analysis in future philosophical speculation. Here, I will outline just two of the most pressing of these concerns:

1. *A concern with the problematic of late antique and medieval thought, culture and religion*: While much has been made of the relationship between ancient thought and continental thought, much less consideration has been given to the problematic of medieval thought. This is no doubt due to the aforementioned lazy supposition that somehow medieval philosophy is nothing more than the 'handmaiden of theology' i.e. that it is not worthy of serious, independent philosophical respect. If nothing else, the analyses of Foucault, Klossowski and Bataille perform a self-deconstruction of this prejudice. What their renewed interest in late antique and medieval philosophy seems to attest to is not so much a defence of the latter per se but rather an anticipation of the connections which have come to exist between pre-modern and post-modern philosophical perspectives. This is hardly surprising given that while modernity was explicitly constructed on the basis of a disavowal of premodern assumptions, the advent of postmodernity appears to signal some kind of failure of this overall project of modernity and thus, by implication, suggests

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the need to re-evaluate the originally disavowed assumptions or premises. Jean-Francois Lyotard's phrase for postmodern temporality, the 'future anterior', seems especially apt here. If Bataille, Klossowski and Foucault can be said to be postmodern thinkers, they can be said to be such insofar as they are 'futural' thinkers but also to the extent that their thought is 'anterior' i.e. looking backwards.

2. *A critique of atheism*: I have elsewhere (Irwin 2006) drawn a clear distinction between three prevalent philosophical responses to religion. One instance is that of an atheism, such as that of Sartre. (Sartre 1980) A second is of a thinking of religion and faith, most especially from a Christian perspective, which while rejecting theism in its traditional form, continues to invoke a relation to an unconditional absolute or God. Jean-Luc Marion (Marion 1998) and René Girard (Girard 2004) can be included in this camp. The third group of thinkers we can describe in relation to a Nietzsche quotation from *Beyond Good and Evil*: "the religious instinct is indeed in the process of growing powerfully – but the theistic satisfaction it refuses with deep suspicion". (Nietzsche 1990) While such a perspective can hardly be said to exhaust Nietzsche's views on religion, nonetheless this particular affirmation of the 'religious instinct' would seem to be close in spirit to the analyses of religion we have seen advanced in this essay by Bataille, Klossowski and Foucault. It is a perspective which unequivocally distances each of these thinkers from orthodox theology in its disavowal of 'theistic satisfaction', while simultaneously undermining a position of simple atheism. The philosophical

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implications of such a critique of atheism remain to date relatively
undeveloped, at least in systematic form. This is perhaps because the
relationship between the heterodox meditations on religion of Bataille,
Klossowski and Foucault, and a critique of atheism, remain mostly implicit in
their analyses, rather then expressly addressed (apart from the Klossowski
quotation which I use as an epigram). The title of my essay is thus a somewhat
retrospective attempt, in conclusion, to identify the future direction of such
analyses, towards a more heterodox understanding of religion and an attempt
to construct an original critique of atheism on the basis of this heterodoxy. The
need for such a reconstruction is insightfully signalled by a related thinker, the
Romanian-French writer E.M. Cioran, when he says '[they] have never asked
themselves the question; 'what begins after God?' (Cioran 1995) Foucault, in
his last analyses of religion, was beginning to sketch the contours of such an
'after God' through his exploration of the concept of 'spirituality' which he
saw as both historically and contemporaneously indissociable from the process
of philosophising per se: 'I believe that, in ancient spirituality, there was
identity or almost so between spirituality and philosophy'. (Foucault 1999)
Such a spirituality must look to both the 'anterior' and to the 'future'. It is just
such a philosophical 'spirituality' which perhaps best supplies the common
intellectual and experiential framework for the studies of Bataille, Klossowski
and Foucault.[1]

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NOTE

[1] I am very grateful for the helpful comments of the initial reviewer of this piece who pointed in particular to the rather inventive aspects of Foucault's readings of the late antique and early medieval thought systems. I have sought to integrate her concerns over the Foucauldian interpretations into my essay where possible. While the actual accuracy of Foucault's readings of the original texts and contexts is a moot point, his avowal of Bataille's 'principle of contestation' indicates his greater concern with what Derrida has referred to as 'active interpretation' rather than simply exposition. In any case, the concern of my essay is less an accurate rendering of the orthodox past and more a focus on how the heterodoxy of Bataille, Klossowski and Foucault points us towards a futural vision of the religious.

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