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**The Pope and the pill; exploring the sexual experiences of
Catholic women in post-war England**



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Declaration

This thesis has not been previously submitted to this or any other University for a degree. The material has not already been submitted as part of required coursework, at any university and any award obtained as a result. The thesis is my own original work.

David Geiringer

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Abstract

This thesis explores the sexual experiences of Catholic women in post-war England. It uses original oral testimony from Catholic laypeople, alongside the internal documents and public pronouncements of the central Catholic hierarchy to reappraise dominant narratives of both sexual and religious change. Historians and cultural commentators have identified sex and its apparent liberation in the decades after the Second World War as the root cause of Christian decline. Catholicism in particular has been viewed as the archetypal antagonist in a story of sixties 'sexual revolution'. This indictment tends to be based on the Catholic hierarchy's continued prohibition of artificial contraception. My research examines Catholic women's everyday experience of negotiating spiritual and sexual demands at a moment when the two increasingly seemed to be at odds with one another. I argue here that the relationship between sex and religion did undergo an unprecedented shift in the post-war decades, but one that does not fit comfortably within the existing frameworks employed by historians. Rather than being simply about an emancipation from the confines of religious repression, the break between sex and Catholicism worked along deeper, ontological lines. As such, the thesis advances an alternative conceptual framework within which to understand post-war cultural change, introducing the dialectics of immanence and transcendence to the historiography of the period.

*The image on the front cover is a still taken from the film Paradise: Faith (2012) dir. Ulrich Seidl.

Abbreviations

CMAC – Catholic Marriage Advisory Council.

DG – David Geiringer (interviewer).

NFP – Natural Family Planning.

NMGC – National Marriage Guidance Council.

PECFM – Preparing Engaged Couples for Marriage.

UNDA – University of Notre Dame Archives.

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Dedication

This thesis is dedicated to the memory of my grandparents.

Introduction

Sexual liberation has been widely identified as the root cause of religious decline in post-war England. Where once individuals were shackled by the rules and restrictions of Christian repression, by the start of the twenty-first century they freely expressed a healthy, autonomous and above all ‘modern’ form of sexuality, or so the story goes. Challenges to this dominant narrative have abounded in recent years. Historians have been roundly warned against falling back on the lingering assumptions of a once totemic secularisation paradigm.¹ The concept of ‘modern’ sexuality however, continues to be taken at face value when dealing with questions of religious change. This is all the more surprising considering the fact that Michel Foucault’s seminal reinterpretation of modern sexuality placed the processes of religion, particularly Catholicism, at its core.² Foucault was to argue that a historically specific form of sexuality emerged in the twentieth century, as religious mechanisms of power and regulation were replaced by secular, psychotherapeutic modes of self-understanding. Despite Foucault’s contributions (which will be addressed more fully at a later stage), there has been a reluctance to explore the relationship between the religious and the sexual in a manner that treats both as fluid, historically contingent categories. One is always positioned as the primary subject of analysis, with the other cast as a static object. In rectification, the main object of enquiry for this thesis is not sex or Catholicism in isolation but the relationship between the two. I argue here that this relationship underwent an unprecedented shift in the post-war decades, a shift which does not fit comfortably within the existing frameworks employed by historians of either religious or sexual change. There is a need to embed the subject in larger, ontological frames of reference in order to accommodate the complexities of both sex and Catholicism.³

These themes are addressed through a topic which has been explored in literary form by David Lodge in his aptly titled novel How Far Can You Go? (1980). Lodge described the lives of a group of young English Catholics grappling with the Church’s teachings on sex and contraception between the early 1950s and mid-1970s. In typically economical prose, Lodge explained that -

¹ For example see L. Woodhead, ‘Introduction’ in L. Woodhead and R. Catto (eds.) Religion and Change in Modern Britain, (New York, 2012) pp.1-34.

² M. Foucault, The History of Sexuality Vol. 1, (London, 1976).

³ Ontology is a word which can be seen to have a somewhat imprecise, even baffling, meaning. For example, the philosopher and author of Historical Ontology Ian Hacking, bluntly explained that he has ‘always disliked the word ‘ontology’ for its vagueness and generality. It is though, a term which is central to my overall intervention here. My use of the concept is elucidated through the course of the thesis. In short, ontology refers to the nature of ‘things’ - the categories of existence that objects and concepts are placed within. I. Hacking, Historical Ontology, (Harvard, 2004) p.1.

‘At some point in the 1960s, hell disappeared. No one could say for certain when this happened. First it was there, then it wasn't.’⁴

Recently, historians of religious change have argued that it was not just hell that disappeared during this decade, but Christianity itself. Callum Brown maintains that a sudden and abrupt ‘sexual revolution’ irreversibly destroyed the authority of what he terms ‘discursive Christianity’ – that is the language, ideas and moral constructs that individuals draw on to make sense of their world. For Brown, Britain’s dominant Christian culture was upheld by women up to this point, when an inevitable process of sexual liberation severed the tie between femininity and piety.⁵ This thesis draws attention to the individuals that constitute apparent anomalies in Brown’s narrative – Catholic women who identify as ‘liberal’. It also looks at Catholic women who do not subscribe to this descriptor, those who contest its professed virtues and those who eschew liberalism as a point of reference all together. Collectively, the life stories of these individuals represent far more than an antidote to Brown’s model of cultural emancipation. They provide an insight into the constellation of ideas and assumptions that underpinned personal understandings of sex and religion in an apparently secular age. Moreover, their testimony offers a means of getting beyond the ‘level of discourse’ at which so many scholarly accounts of personal religiosity are couched. It is the everyday, material *experience* of negotiating spiritual and bodily demands that is placed at the heart of this study.

Catholicism constitutes a particularly illuminating and yet strangely under-explored vehicle for assessing the relationship between religious and sexual change. Brown’s research focuses on the Protestant denomination with little to no mention of Catholicism. In the post-script to a revised edition of his provocatively titled The Death of Christian Britain (2001), he accedes that ‘a fair criticism of the discourse analysis is that I paid too little attention to Roman Catholicism, Anglo-Catholicism and non-evangelicalism generally’.⁶ Indeed, Gerard Parsons has pointed out that ‘the pivotal significance of the 1960s in Christian decline is stressed by placing more emphasis on the Catholic Church than Brown did’.⁷ Parsons’ view seems to be substantiated by Church attendance statistics which indicate that, unlike the Protestant denominations, Catholic disaffiliation increased at the end of the decade rather than the beginning.⁸

⁴ D. Lodge, How far can you go?, (Harmondsworth, paperback edition, 1981) p.113.

⁵ C. Brown, The Death of Christian Britain: Understanding Secularisation, 1800-2000, (Cambridge, 2000) p.9-17.

⁶ Ibid. p.202.

⁷ G. Parsons, ‘How the times they are a-changing: exploring the context of religious transformation in Britain in the 1960s’, in J. Wolfe (ed.), Religion in History: Conflict, Conversion and Coexistence, (Manchester, 2004) p. 164.

⁸ McLeod shows that 52.4% of Catholics attended church regularly in 1960 and 47% still did in 1970, but by 1980 this figure had fallen to 38.6%. Mary Eaton’s study of Catholic women’s organisations in the 1960s indicates that the biggest drop in membership occurred in the last two years of the decade. These statistics suggest that the events of the 1960s had a more direct impact on disaffiliation within the Catholic Church than in the Protestant denominations. McLeod, The Religious Crisis, p. 65, M. Eaton, ‘What became of the children of Mary?’ in M. Hornsby-Smith (ed.), Catholics in England 1950-2000, (London, 1999) p.220.

The belief that Catholicism was damaged by a ‘sexual revolution’ to a greater extent than any other Christian faith tends to be based on the issue of birth control. The introduction of the oral contraceptive Pill in 1961 is often identified as a central component of a sexual revolution, if not its very catalyst. Hera Cook describes the revolutionary effect of the Pill in this way –

‘It increased the control of fear and allowed a greater experience of pleasure and increased emotional aspirations ...[the Pill brought about] substantial improvement, amounting to a transformation, in the lives of English women over the past two centuries’⁹

Although the Catholic Church had traditionally prohibited the use of artificial means of birth control, the inception of the Pill prompted many in the Catholic community to call for this teaching to be revised, not least because to many observers it appeared less ‘artificial’ than existing forms of contraception. Pope Paul VI’s encyclical of 1968 Humanae Vitae rejected these calls outright. The upheaval and outcry which greeted the encyclical extended well beyond the Catholic world, filling up the columns, editorials and letters pages of leading secular publications. Vincent Broome was to ask in the New Statesman later that year:

‘If a man can be shown to be responsible for wrecking thousands of marriages, sexually tormenting countless numbers of simple-minded people and starving millions of young children, would not any moral civilisation indict that man as the arch criminal of the day?’¹⁰

The responses of the Catholic community to the Pope’s pronouncement were certainly mixed but almost always impassioned.¹¹ As a consequence, the years immediately preceding the encyclical’s publication have been largely neglected by historians of both Catholicism and modern sexuality. Furthermore, intellectual assessments of Catholic sexuality in the post-war tend to focus solely on the circumscribed topic of birth control rather than considering the broader dimensions of marital sexuality.

Catholic women who married in the decades after the War confronted a set of questions that had not existed for any previous generation. In a climate that increasingly encouraged personal expression and sexual independence, their beliefs on the morality of the body became the object of fierce personal and public scrutiny. These questions were not just theological abstractions to be pondered over, but real, temporal problematics that shaped marital relations, religious

⁹ H. Cook, The Long Sexual Revolution, (Oxford, 2004) p.8.

¹⁰ Referenced in L. Pyle, Pope and Pill, (London, 1968) p.116.

¹¹ Responses from the global Catholic community to Humanae Vitae, particularly in South America and Africa, are discussed in L. Marks, Sexual Chemistry: A History of the Contraceptive Pill, (London, 2001) Ch. 9.

practice and daily family life. Accordingly, this study uses original oral history research to reconstruct the intimate lives of Catholic women during a period of perceived cultural revolution. It employs and contributes towards a newly developed methodological approach known as ‘lived religious history’ to pursue two related lines of enquiry.¹² Firstly, what can the Catholic experience tell us about the way sex and religion have been categorised in the post-war? Secondly, how has this categorisation worked at a personal level for Catholic individuals but also at an institutional level for the Catholic Church? Accounts of post-war Catholicism are often characterised by binaries of Church and peoples, clergy and laity, institution and subject. The aim here is to eschew this dichotomous approach and recognise the separate and yet unseparate nature of these groupings. With this, it is possible to move beyond a story of top-down power dynamics and provide a valuable contribution to the histories not only of sex and Catholicism, but also the post-war in general. Notions of authority, autonomy and liberation punctuate the historiography of the post-war, marking out the values and criteria through which change has been measured. The lens of Catholicism encourages us to unpack and resituate these ideas in a somewhat unfashionable and yet profoundly meaningful meta-physical context.

Historical and historiographical understandings of sex and religion

Callum Brown’s research has received much attention, both critical and laudatory, from within the historical discipline; his work has been described as a ‘seminal reinterpretation of the history of secularisation’.¹³ My intention is to situate Brown’s approach to religious change within its wider intellectual setting as much as to respond to his conclusions on the subject. ‘Discursive Christianity’ is a construction which reveals much about the way religion has been categorised in the twentieth century. For Brown, it constitutes a corrective to the statistical methodologies employed by ‘traditional’ sociologists.¹⁴ He claims his ‘modern cultural theory’ approach to oral history allows him to get beyond dry church attendance figures and access the ‘personal’ -

‘This failure [of ‘traditional’ social scientists] is caused by a focus on ‘structures’ (such as churches and social classes) to the neglect of ‘the personal’ in piety. The ‘personal’ is intrinsically wrapped up with language, discourses on personal moral worth, the narrative structures within which these are located, and the timing of change to these.’¹⁵

Like Brown, I also use oral testimony to get at the complex and highly subjective meanings that are attached to personal religiosities. Unlike Brown, my rendering of the personal pays

¹² The first chapter includes a detailed description of ‘lived religious history’ and its place in my own methodology.

¹³ N Christie and M. Gauvreau, ‘Introduction’ in N. Christie and M. Gauvreau (eds.) The Sixties and Beyond: Dechristianization in North America and Western Europe, 1945-2000, (Canada, 2013) p.1.

¹⁴ C. Brown, The Death of Christian Britain: Understanding Secularisation, 1800-2000, (Cambridge, 2000) p.9-17.

¹⁵ Ibid., p.195, 203.

particular attention to the experiential— spatial and temporal moments of material existence. Intellectual appraisals of personal religiosity tend to privilege the discursive over the experiential. A socio-scientific tradition that can be traced back through the work of Peter Berger in the 1960s all the way to Emile Durkheim, has insisted on attributing changes in religious belief systems to the operation of liberating ideas and languages opening up an individual's consciousness.¹⁶ This approach, like that of the quantitative sociologists Brown chastises, is liable to obscure the ways in which discourse and experience are intertwined and thereby equally overlook integral aspects of the 'personal'.

But 'discursive Christianity' also has a distinctly post-war flavour to it. Brown points out that his focus on discourse has been produced by his engagement with the 'linguistic turn', an intellectual movement which is generally seen to be located in the deconstructionism of the 1960s.¹⁷ The 'postmodern-inspired discourse analysis' that Brown employs to evaluate personal religiosity is not idiosyncratic, but indicative of a much larger re-categorisation of the religious that has taken hold in the post-war. Religion has been rendered ethereal, immaterial, abstract; removed from the earthly domain of daily living. The Catholic philosopher Charles Taylor speaks of religion as being pushed into the 'transcendental realm' in late-modernity. He argues that since the 'cultural revolution' of the 1950s and 1960s, a hegemonic 'immanent frame' has defined the way men and women make sense of the world and their own position within it -

'We can come to see the growth of civilization, or modernity, as synonymous with laying out of a closed immanent frame; within this civilized values develop, and a single-minded focus on the human good aided by a fuller and fuller use of scientific reason, permits the greatest flourishing possible of human beings. Religion not only menaces these goals with its fanaticism, but it also undercuts reason, which comes to be seen as rigorously requiring scientific materialism'¹⁸

Taylor maintains that the grounds for this immanent frame had been developing within the texts of intellectual elites for centuries, but that it was not until the social and cultural transformations of the 1950s and 1960s that it infiltrated the popular imagination. For Taylor, this is what 'secularism' really means: not simply the subtraction of religion, but the emergence of a new epistemological ideology that directs what should and should not be believed in.¹⁹ The trend that Taylor describes is not limited to the social sciences and their methodologies, but works on 'ordinary' men and women at an everyday level. It is a model that seems to resonate with

¹⁶ E. Durkheim, *The Elementary Forms of the Religious Life*, translated by Carol Cosman (Oxford, 1912), P. Berger, *The Sacred Canopy: Elements of a Sociological Theory of Religion*, (New York, 1967).

¹⁷ Brown, *Death of Christian*, p.202.

¹⁸ C. Taylor, *A Secular Age*, (Harvard, 2007) p.548.

¹⁹ Ibid. pp.22-27.

Brown's own approach to religion as well as that of the secularising individuals he historicises.²⁰

The first task for the historian of religious change is surely to move beyond this 'discursive' reading of religion. A growing collection of writers have begun to do just that in the decade since the publication of Brown's work, taking up Manuel Vasquez's call for a 'materialist theory of religion'.²¹ This movement has developed in an international context but remains to be fully realised in British studies. The second task for the historian of contemporary religion is to offer some reflections on how and why this discursive approach to religion came to be. Despite Taylor's intention to embed his philosophical theories in the context of historical development, he offers little in the way of firm evidence. This thesis provides material through which to evaluate his ideas and link them back to the wider social, cultural and intellectual setting of post-war England. In doing so, we can draw out underlying commonalities in the conceptions of religion advanced by Brown, his liberated subjects and crucially, those who continue to identify as religious.

Both Taylor and Brown are primarily interested in making sense of a 'secular age' –

'What, precisely, happens when a society in which it is virtually impossible not to believe in God becomes one in which faith, even for the staunchest believer, is only one human possibility among others?'²²

Leaving aside the rather stale question of whether contemporary England can be fairly described as secular, my main focus is on how this dominant story of religious change relates to what Ken Plummer describes as the dominant 'sexual story' of our times – a liberationist narrative.²³ Taylor's notion of an immanent frame takes on a significance above and beyond its original use when applied to this question. Religion may have been forced into a transcendental realm in late modernity as he maintains, but this phenomenon can only be understood in relation to a reciprocal shift in the construction of human sexuality. Various scholars have followed in the line of Michel Foucault and argued that a new and somehow distinctive form of sexuality

²⁰ It should be noted that since this work, Brown has published two more books on religious change. The first, Religion and Society in Twentieth Century Britain, (New York, 2006) was largely based on the same 'discursive analysis', and the second used demographic statistics to look at the relationship between sexual and religious behaviour since the 1960s. However, Brown again reiterated the formative role of 'discourse' in this book's prologue 'The basis of the present volume is that discourses, and popular revolt against them, change the way people lead their lives'. Religion and the Demographic Revolution, (Woodbridge, 2012) p.xi.

²¹ M. Vasquez, More than Belief: a Materialist Theory of Religion, (Oxford, 2010).

²² Taylor, A Secular Age, backcover.

²³ K. Plummer, Telling Sexual Stories; Power, Change and Social Worlds (London, 1995) p. 123.

emerged in the twentieth century.²⁴ There remains disagreement over the nature and timings of such a development. I want to argue here that a Catholic lens brings into focus a hitherto under-appreciated aspect of this ‘modern’ form of sexuality - its distinct immanence. It has been observed before that, since the eighteenth century, sex was becoming increasingly understood in scientific terms – as a biological process driven by instinctive, animal urges.²⁵ It was only in the post-war decades however, that this ‘naturalised’ notion of sexuality became fully enshrined in popular and academic sexual discourses. Rather than being purely about the advent of ‘scientific reason’, the immanence of sexuality was intimately tied up with the denial of its transcendental potential and its resulting opposition to the logic of a religious world view. It was the inherent mystery of sex - its pleasure, meaning and function – that was snubbed out in the decades after the war. In this sense, when I speak of applying a Catholic ‘lens’ to post-war cultural change, it is as much a lens *of* Catholicism as it is a lens *on* Catholicism.²⁶

My analysis of the life stories of Catholic individuals suggests that there was indeed a rupture in the relationship between sex and religion in the middle of the twentieth century. The terms ‘liberation’ and ‘secularisation’ only tell part of the story though, or at least part of society’s story. The main intervention that I make to the field is in encouraging us collectively to think of this rupture as working along deeper, ontological lines. The religious was categorised as a matter of abstracted transcendence just as the sexual became cast as a matter of manifest immanence.²⁷ This trend should be viewed as a single, unified expression of a particular historical moment rather than as two separate developments. Certainly tensions between sex and religion had been a prominent theme in British culture before the War – a literary tradition epitomised by the likes of Gerard Manley Hopkins and Grahame Greene had explored these tensions in relation to Catholicism specifically.²⁸ But the inverse categorisation of the sexual and the religious occurred in an accelerated and essentially new manner in the second half of the twentieth century. It shaped not only the moral, linguistic and theological codes through which Catholics made sense of their beliefs on the body, but also the physical, emotional and embodied sensibilities they experienced on a daily basis. It was a re-categorisation of lived experience as much as knowledge.

²⁴ For example see D. Halperin ‘Is there a history of sexuality?’ *History and Theory*, 23, (1989) pp. 257-274.

²⁵ For an interesting discussion of how ideas of essentialism, evolutionary biology and the ‘natural’ have been treated by historians of sexuality see H. Cocks, ‘The History of Sexuality meets Evolutionary Biology’, *Contemporary British History*, 24,(2010) pp.109-129.

²⁶ This should be distinguished from my personal theological beliefs, which are deemed relevant and detailed in the first chapter, but not determinative of this ‘lens’.

²⁷ Exactly what I mean by ‘immanence’ and ‘transcendence’ is discussed more fully at a later stage in the subsection ‘The case for immanence and transcendence’, p. 20.

²⁸ A number of works from both writers, specifically G. Greene, *The Power and the Glory*, (London, 1940), G.M. Hopkins, ‘The Wreck of the Deutschland’ in E. Baugh (ed.), *Poems and Prose of Gerald Manley Hopkins*, (London, 1985) p.12.

The research contained here provides a starting point for historicising this way of thinking about sex and religion. Amongst the myriad of social, economic and intellectual factors that contributed to its emergence, I identify two key developments – the emotional and existential consequences of the Second World War and the ascendancy of psychoanalytical modes of understanding.²⁹ The two did not occur in isolation from one another; it was attempts to explain the atrocities of the holocaust and the war in general that solidified psychology's status as a legitimate and necessary scientific discipline. In this sense, my research contributes to the growing body of work that challenges the idea that the 1960s represented a singularly revolutionary decade. The 'sixties' however, as a 'heavily edited and reworked concept saturated in symbolism, meaning and myth', played a central role in both the legacy and construction of this conceptual separation.³⁰ The revolutionary rhetoric of the 'swinging sixties' represented an important point of reference for Catholic women remembering personal and collective change, but it was also a presence that shaped the way the Catholic Church approached sexuality throughout the period in question.

The two main bodies of evidence that this thesis engages with reveal how an immanent/transcendent dichotomy worked in relation to sex and religion during the post-war. After a methodological chapter on sources and approach, the second chapter examines the Church's public and private discussion of sex between 1945 and 1980. It demonstrates how Catholic authorities defined female sexuality as an immanent, biological matter removed from the ethereal concerns of Catholic theology. The following four chapters explore Catholic laypeople's personal memories of the period, detailing the way they co-opted and adhered to this dichotomous discourse, but also reworked and resisted it. The interview process brought into focus the way a conceptual disconnect between sex and religion had structured their daily lives, while also highlighting the failure of this discourse to represent the nuances of their sexual and religious experiences.

In bringing together these two bodies of evidence, the findings of this study hold significant implications for contemporary debates about sexual morality within the Catholic community.³¹ For all the optimism Pope Francis's rhetoric has instilled in the 'liberal' Catholic community, he has kept the door to doctrinal change firmly shut. His recent comments on the need for the Church to move on from its 'obsession with the issues of abortion, gay marriage and contraception' have been welcomed by many avowed progressives, but in lumping these

²⁹ For a more detailed discussion of the relationship between psychoanalysis and Total War in Britain, see M. Shapira, *The War Inside: Psychoanalysis, Total War, and the Making of the Democratic Self in Postwar Britain*, (Cambridge, 2013).

³⁰ M. Donnelly, *Sixties Britain*, (Oxford, 2005) p.1.

³¹ L. Marks, *Sexual Chemistry: A History of the Contraceptive Pill*, (London, 2001), A. Greeley, 'The Sexual Revolution in the Catholic Clergy', *Review of Religious Research*, 14, (1973) p.93.

‘issues’ together their theological and ethical specificities have been muddled and dissolved.³² Moreover, the drive to transcend such matters has also served to marginalise and silence meaningful dialogue about doctrinal scrutiny. In a climate in which the Catholic birth control debate appears to be closed off, this thesis asks whether historicising its emergence in decades after the war could provide an alternative point of entry. Did Pope Paul VI’s rejection of a highly intellectualised, theological case for change in the 1960s close the door to doctrinal change all together, or did it only close this route to change? Oral history offers a valuable means of getting beyond the immanent versus transcendent dichotomy that coloured Catholic understanding of sex and religion in the 1960s. The way the ‘personal’ is measured, valued and understood within Catholicism is ripe for reappraisal.

Frameworks built around sexual and religious change

The relationship between religious and sexual change in modern Britain has garnered much attention from historians, sociologists, theologians and philosophers in recent decades. A plethora of different explanatory frameworks have been used to make sense of the subject, with varying aims, interests and values shaping the conclusions that have been arrived at as well as the questions that have been asked in the first place. This section reflects on the questions that I will be asking of the topic. By this I do not simply mean the questions that are asked in the interview, but the lines of enquiry that I have pursued throughout the research process.

Dominant historical frameworks have centred on the question of a ‘direction of causality’ – did changes in sexual culture affect a change in religious culture or was the opposite more the case?³³ This line of enquiry is premised on the assumption that there were two separate ‘spheres’, one religious and one sexual, acting independently of one another. It encourages a way of thinking about modernity that positions the religious, be it in terms of central institutions like the Church or personal theistic beliefs, outside the realm of the mainstream. This way of thinking is inscribed in the language that Brown used to describe the main point of contention in the field – the ‘internal versus external debate’. According to Brown, the important question for historians of religious change is whether a ‘religious crisis’ in the 1960s was rooted in ‘internal’ causes (problems within the Churches) or ‘external’, secular developments.³⁴ I suggest here that this dispute does not represent a productive way of approaching the subject. It constructs an artificial divide between the religious and the secular and can not accommodate the points of interaction between these two ‘spheres’. As Linda Woodhead and Rebecca Catto argue in the culminating publication of the AHRC’s Religion and Society Programme, the terms ‘religion’

³² Reported in *The Independent*, Thursday 19 September 2013.

³³ C. Brown, ‘What was the Religious Crisis?’ *Journal of Religious History*, 34, (2010) p. 473.

³⁴ *Ibid.* pp.473-477.

and ‘secularity’ should not be viewed as clear and distinct entities in a zero-sum equation.³⁵ Instead, there is a need to engage with larger, philosophical frames of reference in order to accommodate the ‘fullness’ of religious and sexual sensibilities.³⁶ It should be stressed that I am not suggesting that Brown and McLeod’s framework can be replaced wholesale. Their dispute attempts to foreground valuable questions about agency and authority. It is more that these questions need to be embedded in a framework that leaves space for the mysterious, existential and ultimately transcendental dimensions of both sexual and religious experience.

Debating the internal and external causes of a religious crisis

The concept of a ‘religious crisis’ has emerged out of the growing body of work that challenges a ‘traditional’ model of religious decline. Prior to the work of Brown, secularisation had been largely thought of as a gradual process rooted in the social and cultural upheavals of the late eighteenth century.³⁷ The demise of religion was widely considered to be the handmaiden of industrialisation, urbanisation, and enlightenment rationality. Brown’s research made a major contribution to the field in demonstrating that this story was gender specific – he argued that while men may have been steadily disaffiliating for over two centuries, women had upheld Britain’s Christian culture right up until the late 1950s. In relocating the secularising moment to a ‘sudden and abrupt’ cultural revolution in the 1960s, Brown’s work has spawned a collection of sociological and historical studies that follow his lead.

Expanding on Brown’s model, Hugh McLeod introduced the term ‘religious crisis’ for the first time in his exhaustive account of trans-denominational Christian decline.³⁸ While Brown’s research focused almost entirely on the Anglican experience, McLeod’s project encompassed a range of Christian Churches and stressed the need to recognise denominational variations.³⁹ The historiographical landscape of the field continues to be dominated by Brown and McLeod, with each modestly bestowing on the other the responsibility for ‘fundamentally shifting’ historical attentions in the study of religious change.⁴⁰ Moreover, Joy Dixon has pointed out that since the

³⁵ L. Woodhead and R. Catto, Religion and Change in Modern Britain, (New York, 2012) p. 7.

³⁶ ‘Fullness’ is a term used by Charles Taylor to denote a state of meaning and existence which humans aspire to. It involves the transcendent as well as the immanent concerns of reality according to Taylor – ‘We all see our lives, and /or the space wherein we live our lives, as having a moral/spiritual shape. Somewhere, in some activity of condition, lies a fullness, a richness, that is, in that place (activity or condition), life is fuller, richer deeper, more worthwhile, more admirable, more what it should be.’ Taylor, A Secular Age, p. 5.

³⁷ See R. Wallis and S. Bruce, ‘Secularization: the orthodox model’ in Bruce (ed.) Religion and Modernization: Sociologists and Historians Debate the Secularization Thesis, (Oxford, 1992), A.D. Gilbert, ‘Secularization and the future’ in S. Gilley and W.J. Sheils (eds.), A History of Religion in Britain, (Oxford, 1994).

³⁸ McLeod, Religious Crisis, p.1.

³⁹ McLeod, Religious Crisis, p.61.

⁴⁰ Brown states that ‘Since the 1970s, one historian has stood out as the intellectual and research leader in the field of secularization studies’. In CG Brown and M Snape (eds.), Secularisation in the Christian World, (England, 2010) p.1, McLeod outlines the importance of Brown’s contribution to the field in McLeod, The Religious Crisis, p.9.

publication of Brown's work, 'gender has emerged as the single most important definer of the timing and nature of Christian disaffiliation'.⁴¹ Where Brown and McLeod once worked to break the orthodoxy of an 'enlightenment story' of secularisation, they have now succeeded in establishing something of their own through the concept of a religious crisis.

The main challenge that has been levelled against Brown and McLeod has been over the very idea that Christianity is 'dead' or in 'crisis'. David Nash applauds Brown for undermining the 'broad and homogenised process' of secularisation envisioned by sociologists, but decries his penchant for firm and inevitable endpoints. Nash points to the residue of Christian narratives of redemption and conversion in post-sixties Britain.⁴² This would seem to be the obvious line that my research would take, albeit with a more 'social' bent than Nash's cultural analysis. The individuals that I have spoken to show that Catholicism is not dead in a very concrete sense, and moreover, that women can think of themselves as sexually liberated as well as Christian. But Brown and McLeod are not claiming that nobody identifies as religious in contemporary Britain. Their argument is more about the 'dominant culture' in which religion is understood.⁴³ The question of whether we truly live in a 'secular age', or whether Christian Britain is truly 'dead', tends to fall back on differing semantic interpretations of the terms involved. Even Brown and Steve Bruce, a vociferous defender of the 'secularisation thesis', have acknowledged this, although they continue to press the salience of the debate.⁴⁴ A more important question for my research is how and why this story of religious change has become so pervasive, and which strategies we should use to make sense of it.

This thesis focuses on a rare but apparently significant point of divergence between the two scholars. Dubbed by Brown the 'internal versus external dispute', it represents a fundamental disagreement over the causes of the religious crisis. Brown emphasises what he terms the 'external' causes of the crisis: an essentially secular tide of sexual liberation that recalibrated the way individual women constructed their sense of self. The Churches were all but powerless to counter this inexorable popular movement according to Brown.⁴⁵ For Hugh McLeod, the 'religious crisis' was largely formulated within Christianity itself. It was 'internal' conflicts between factions within the Churches that ultimately broke Christianity's moral authority.⁴⁶ Rather than simply being the consequence of feminist awakenings, McLeod's religious crisis

⁴¹ J. Dixon, 'Modernity, Heterodoxy and the Transformation of Religious Cultures' in S. Morgan (ed.), Women, Gender and Religious Culture, (Oxford, 2010) pp.211-230.

⁴² D. Nash 'Reconnecting religion with social and cultural history: secularization's failure as a master narrative', Cultural and Social History, 1, 2004, pp. 302-35.

⁴³ Brown, Death of Christian, pp. 199-234.

⁴⁴ C. Brown, Death of Christian, p.207, S. Bruce, "Review of 'Redefining Christian Britain post-1945 perspectives' (eds.) by J. Garnett, M. Grimley, A. Harris, W. Whyte and S. Williams", Twentieth Century British History, 19, (2008) p.248.

⁴⁵ Brown, Religion and Society, pp.240-253.

⁴⁶ McLeod, The Religious Crisis, p.8.

was produced by a number of factors including notably the workings of ‘liberal and pragmatic Christians who overturned traditional religious culture through supporting liberal, moral reform’.⁴⁷

Both Brown and McLeod identify this internal versus external conflict as the single most important point of debate in historical explanations of a ‘religious crisis’. A primary aim of this thesis is to highlight the inherent misapprehensions of such a dispute. These ‘internal’ and ‘external’ categories provide a limited framework within which to explain the changes that occurred in both sex and Christianity during the 1960s. They uphold the misconception that Christian organisations and institutions were acting independently of secular developments, and that changes in the secular world were in no way affected by Christian positions. The material sourced here, notably that of the second chapter, demonstrates the interactions that existed between these two ‘spheres’. When trying to explain the relationship between a ‘religious crisis’ and a ‘sexual revolution’, it is important to recognise that religious and secular discussions about sex often informed each other, rather than representing distinct avenues of discourse.

There will, of course, be problems with any explanatory framework that a historian imposes over the events of the past. As John Tosh points out, these frameworks often provide necessary aids to the communication of meaning and it is clear that Brown and McLeod use the terms ‘internal’ and ‘external’ in this way rather than as concrete categories that relate to a social reality.⁴⁸ Nonetheless, the language that frames this particular dispute does not provide a useful means of assessing the changes of the 1960s. It is not simply that these categories fail to accommodate the complexities of the topic. They also encourage a particular way of thinking about religious change which insists on seeking out some sort of antagonist. Historical accounts of the Church’s role in the ‘religious crisis’ have continually worked within an evaluative rather than analytical framework. Static notions of ‘good’ and ‘bad’ sex pervade the existing historiography.⁴⁹ The need to identify a single culprit, be it in the form of an anachronistic Church or an essentially secular tide of sexual liberation, is perhaps necessitated by a model that proclaims the irreversible death of Christian Britain.⁵⁰ The culture of blame that surrounds the subject may be a testament to the gravity of the questions involved, but it has clouded the tenor of historical appraisals.

Brown and McLeod’s accounts of a religious crisis are articulated through a vocabulary of ‘emancipation’, ‘authority’ and ‘autonomy’. Their models of Christian decline work at a level of straight-forward, top-down power dynamics. In a number of ways, this was an important aspect

⁴⁷ McLeod, *Religious Crisis*, p.181.

⁴⁸ J. Tosh, *The Pursuit of History*, (Great Britain, 2006) pp.145-173.

⁴⁹ G. Rubin, ‘Thinking Sex: Notes for a Radical Theory of the Politics of Sexuality’, in C. Vance (ed.), *Pleasure and Danger*, (New York, 1984).

⁵⁰ C. Brown, *The Death of Christian Britain*, p. 9-17.

of the Catholic experience in the post-war. The moral authority of the central Church in matters of sex was fundamentally undermined by the events of the 1960s. The Catholic commentator Quentin de Le Bedoyere describes Humanae Vitae as a ‘historical watershed’ for the consciences of Catholic men and women –

‘...for the first time the general Catholic community was faced by the solemn reiteration of a formal moral teaching which many had come to doubt – and acting on that doubt did not exclude them from the Church’.⁵¹

It is important to remember that Humanae Vitae was not an infallible teaching (when the Pope is deemed to be incapable of error in pronouncing dogma), but for many Catholics, it called in to question the absolute authority of the Church as a source of moral guidance. After the 1960s, the classical, coercive form of power that the clerical hierarchy had commanded over the laity for centuries ceased to function in the same way.

The reason Brown’s theories are given a position of such prominence in setting up this thesis is not simply because of the academic acclaim his model has achieved, but because many of his ideas resonated with the interviewees’ testimony. ‘Liberation’, ‘revolution’, ‘repression’ and above all the character of the ‘self’ were all formative terms of understanding in the way the interviewees constructed their life stories, terms which form the backbone of Brown’s narrative. However, this shared vocabulary alone does not vindicate Brown’s conclusions or indeed the intellectual framework he constructed around the subject. My intention is to scratch below the surface of terms like ‘liberation’ and ‘autonomy’ to get at the subjective, highly personalised meanings that individuals attach to them. With this, the study of religious change will be better placed to make sense of not only the demise of certain religious codes, but also the concomitant survival of others.

Brown and McLeod are not alone in adopting what Charles Taylor would described as a ‘horizontal’ or ‘flattened’ conception of the relationship between sex and religion, in which elucidating power relations is implicitly defined as the central goal of the historian.⁵² With his story of pathological discourses usurping Catholic regimes of regulation, Foucault claimed to reconceptualise the way power worked in relation to the sexual subject. Whether it be through confessional or therapeutic techniques, discipline and governance have been exercised as much from within the individual as from without according to Foucault.⁵³ His model of historical

⁵¹ Q. de la Bedoyere, Autonomy and Obedience in the Catholic Church, (London, 2002) p.2.

⁵² Taylor imagines a two-dimensional moral space. The ‘horizontal’ gives you a ‘point of resolution, the fair award’ - it is about immanent, humanistic power dynamics. The vertical ‘hopes to rise higher, to re-establish trust’, ‘to overcome fear by offering oneself to it; responding with love and forgiveness, thereby tapping a source of goodness, and healing’. It includes the ethereal, transcendent and unknowable. Taylor, A Secular Age, pp.706-708.

⁵³ Foucault, The History of sexuality.

change was therefore primarily concerned with how power worked, even if the nature of this power differed from previous definitions.

Much like the historiography of the religious crisis, historians of sexuality have tended to see their primary task as explicating the changing nature of authority. Matt Houlbrook attributes the history of sexuality's focus on 'questions of regulation, power and subjectivity' to the 'over-determining influence of Foucault'. As a result, Houlbrook argues, 'ironically, we seem to have a history of sexuality with the sex written out'.⁵⁴ Regardless of the culpability of Foucault's legacy, intellectual assessments of sex have been more preoccupied with theorising over the meanings that have been attached to certain actions rather than the actions themselves. Hera Cook has made an explicit attempt to challenge this tendency and 'write the sex back into the history of sex', using demographic statistical data to return historical attentions to sexual 'behaviour'.⁵⁵ Houlbrook recognised the value of Cook's undertaking, but ultimately remained unconvinced as to its success.⁵⁶ This thesis attempts to undertake a similar task to Cook's, but with a focus on the 'experiential'; spatial and temporal moments of lived existence. It follows the line of a more recent offering from Cook, an analysis of Edwardian sex education, which argues that 'a focus on corporeal experience and emotion enables a deeper understanding of cultural mores and of transmission to the next generation, which is fundamental to the process of change'.⁵⁷ Embedding sexual experience in an ontological or 'vertical' framework enables us to recognise the body as a 'thing', as Susan Bordo would have it, as opposed to a passive symbolic on which meaning and power are inscribed.⁵⁸ Just as the lens of Catholicism can prompt historians of sexuality to rethink the nature and purpose of their discipline, so it can equally prompt historians in general to reappraise the position of power in their stories of the past.

The case for immanence and transcendence

In providing an introduction to the ontological framework that will be advanced here, this subsection has three objectives. Firstly, it fleshes out what I mean by immanence and transcendence, drawing on the work of a range of diverse and sometimes inconsonant scholars who have used the terms to make sense of sex, religion and gender. It then shows how this framework applies to the two main bodies of evidence with which this thesis engages. Finally, I

⁵⁴ M. Houlbrook, 'Sexing the History of Sexuality', *History Workshop Journal*, 60, (2005) p. 217.

⁵⁵ Ibid. p.220.

⁵⁶ Ibid. p.221.

⁵⁷ H. Cook, 'Emotions, Bodies, Sexuality and Sex Education in Edwardian England', *The Historical Journal*, 55, (2012) p.475.

⁵⁸ Taylor, *A Secular Age*, pp.706-708, S. Bordo, *Unbearable Weight: Feminism, Western Culture and the Body*, (California, 2003) p.3.

make the case for immanence and transcendence being the most appropriate and indeed fertile way of conceptualising the relationship between sex and Catholicism in the post-war years.

Notions of immanence and transcendence have been a central building block in Catholic theology since the birth of Christianity. The writings and speeches of St Paul included a number of meditations on the theme, texts which have been thoroughly dissected by theologians and practitioners of religious studies for centuries.⁵⁹ St Augustine placed the notion of transcendence at the centre of his theology on the body and his, now highly controversial, ethics of sexuality.⁶⁰ He maintained that humanity's primary goal must be to transcend the carnality of the body and its processes; sex and death are what separate us from divinity according to Augustinian philosophy.⁶¹ Thomas Aquinas similarly elucidated the 'otherness' and yet 'sameness' of Jesus Christ through the concepts of immanence and transcendence.⁶² In this way, Christian theologians have generally used immanence and transcendence as a way of making sense of God's relationship with nature, particularly the incarnation. While the framework offers a useful means of integrating personal theistic beliefs into this study, I am more interested in how immanence and transcendence can be applied to a human, experiential plane, or more specifically, historicised constructions of this plane.

In the post-war years, immanence and transcendence were taken up by gender theorists as a way of explaining the differing roles attributed to men and women throughout history. In her groundbreaking work of feminist constructionism The Second Sex (1949), Simone De Beauvoir used 'immanence' to describe the historic domain assigned to women: a closed-off realm where women were interior, passive, static, and immersed in themselves. Conversely, she used 'transcendence' to describe the male: active, creative, productive, powerful, extending outward into the external universe.⁶³ De Beauvoir's decision to harness the classically Christian discourse of immanence and transcendence is all the more poignant given the fact that the Vatican placed her text on its 'List of Prohibited Books' (Index Librorum Prohibitorum).⁶⁴ The Church's evolving stance towards social constructionism and the implications these theories had for Catholic understandings of sex and gender is explored at a later stage in the thesis. De Beauvoir was writing at a time when the very basis of Christian epistemology was being

⁵⁹ For example, in St. Paul's letter to the Philippians he writes "The God who made the world and all things in it, since He is Lord of heaven and earth, does not dwell in temples made with hands; neither is He served by human hands, as though He needed anything, since He Himself gives to all life and breath and all things; and He made from one, every nation of mankind to live on all the face of the earth, having determined their appointed times, and the boundaries of their habitation, that they should seek God, if perhaps they might grope for Him and find Him, though He is not far from each one of us; for in Him we live and move and exist." Acts 17:24-31, The New Jerusalem Bible, (New York, 2009)

⁶⁰ For a contemporary discussion of Augustinian sexual ethics and the controversy it has attracted, see T. Nisula, Augustine and the Function of the Concupiscence, (Leiden, 2012).

⁶¹ Augustine, City of God, trans. RW Dyson, (Cambridge, 1998).

⁶² T. Aquinas, Summa Theologiae, Questions on God, edited by B. Davies and B. Leftow, (Cambridge, 2006).

⁶³ S. de Beauvoir, The Second Sex, translated by Constance Borde, Sheila Malovany-Chevallier, (New York, 2012).

⁶⁴ S. Stoller, Simone de Beauvoir's Philosophy of Age; Gender Ethics and Time, (Berlin, 2014) p.2.

challenged and inverted, a development which did not escape the attentions of the Vatican. Although the second volume of her work dealt with 'Lived Experience', De Beauvoir's discussion of immanence and transcendence was largely based on her engagement with leading intellectual elites – biblical and ancient Greek thinkers, enlightenment philosophers and literary producers. This thesis is concerned more with how these categories worked at a social level than how they were constructed in 'texts'. They are treated as ontological rather than epistemological concepts.

In the 1990s, a collection of feminist philosophers of religion adopted De Beauvoir's immanent/transcendent framework as a way of explaining the intersection between gender and religion. Grace Jantzen spoke of 'nature' as being defined as essentially feminine in Western thinking – forces of chaos, death and destruction which masculine civilisation bucks against -

'God/Religion becomes the guarantor of civilisation and its moral and legal system which keeps the death-drive in bounds. God, in such a system, must of course be firmly male, since civilisation is built on the mastery of the 'female' chaos, nature and death.'⁶⁵

Similarly, Luce Irigaray argued that women have been defined by their maternal, bodily functions throughout history and thus excluded from the realm of the divine.⁶⁶ This gendered construction of divinity was a language and symbolic order that the interviewees grappled with throughout the interviews. It holds a particularly pointed significance for Catholic women in twenty-first century England, with the Church of England extending the purview of women to occupy higher positions within its clerical hierarchy. My use of transcendence does draw a correlation with divinity, but also extends beyond this theistic application. It is treated as a broader category which is principally defined by its opposition to what is considered to be immanent, this-worldly, substantial.

Immanence and transcendence represents a way of approaching the subject that came out of the research process. The documents of the central Church, together with the testimony of Catholic women, provide a window into the way this dichotomy worked at both a personal and institutional level, while also allowing us to trace its historical development. The second chapter of the thesis addresses the Catholic Church's understanding of female sexuality in the 1960s. It looks at the way female sexuality was constructed in public pronouncements like Humanae Vitae, but also in the internal debates and discussions that existed behind closed doors. In 1962, Pope John XXIII set up a secretive Commission to advise him on questions of birth control and marital sexuality. The final report of the Commission, leaked in the British press in 1966,

⁶⁵ G. Jantzen, Becoming Devine: towards a Feminist Philosophy of Religion, (Manchester, 1998) p.45.

⁶⁶ L. Irigaray, An Ethics of Sexual Difference, trans. C. Burke and G. C. Gill, (Cornell, 1993).

recommended a change in the Church's teaching on contraceptive morality.⁶⁷ The then Pope, Paul VI, rejected this recommendation in Humanae Vitae, a decision which has left the workings of the Commission almost entirely obscured from historical attentions. The previously unpublished papers of the Commission offer an insight into the way Catholic authorities understood the relationship between sex and Catholicism at the height of the 'permissive moment'.⁶⁸ They indicate that, contrary to popular and academic thinking, the Catholic Church paid close attention to women's sexual pleasure. However, the way this pleasure was defined reveals much about both Catholic and broader intellectual understandings of female sexuality in the post-war decades. Sex was treated as a biological mechanism that could be measured purely through quantitative, socio-scientific methods. It was analysed within an immanent framework that was juxtaposed to the transcendent realm of traditional Catholic theology. Crucially, the Commission members did not speak to Catholic women about their experiences, an omission which reflected latent assumptions about the authority of the empirical and the gendered ownership of the transcendental.

It has been observed before that there was not one but two Catholic birth control debates running concurrently – one over the question of Papal authority in doctrinal reform and a second about the intrinsic morality of artificial means of contraception.⁶⁹ Humanae Vitae was principally a product of the former, with Pope Paul VI believing he did not have the right to enact a change in the Church's teaching. This separation between questions of theological authority and intrinsic sexual morality was not only present in Humanae Vitae, but also inscribed in the 'liberal' case for change. Progressive Commission members equally defined human sexuality as the immanent counterpoint to the transcendence of Catholic religiosity. In this sense, Humanae Vitae, the workings of the Commission and the duality of the wider Catholic birth control debate were all expressions of a much deeper conceptual separation between sex and religion, rather than amounting to a straightforward ideological victory for 'orthodox' Catholicism over 'liberal' Catholicism.

This conceptual separation was not limited to Catholic authorities, but reflected the dynamics of a wider intellectual culture in the post-war. Alongside leading bishops and clergymen, the Commission was made up of lay specialists drawn from secular disciplines such as psychology, biology, medicine and sociology. Their discussions therefore reflected broader, secular understandings of sex and religion in the 1960s, not just those of the 'Catholic world' as McLeod would have it.⁷⁰ A key feature of the 'liberationist' ideology, which reached its zenith

⁶⁷ H. de Reidmatten, 'Responsible Parenthood; Report on the Fourth Session', John Marshall Papers, (UNDA).

⁶⁸ J. Weeks, Sex Politics and Society: The Regulations of Sexuality since 1800 (fourth edition), (Oxford, 2014) p.321.

⁶⁹ For example L. Pyle, Pope and Pill, pp.1-19.

⁷⁰ McLeod, Religious Crisis, p. 8.

in the late 1960s, was the separation of sex and religion along immanent and transcendent lines. Although this categorisation had its roots in the preceding decades, the sixties saw it firmly established in public, intellectual and ecclesiastical discourses.

The testimony of the interview respondents suggest that this separation took a little longer to manifest in the everyday lives of Catholic individuals, with many interviewees identifying the 1970s rather than the 1960s as the pivotal decade in their sexual and religious development. Chapters three to five show how the ontological categorisation of the religious and the sexual had a more nuanced and ambivalent place in the life stories of Catholic women. It was a discursive pattern that framed the way many of the interviewees constructed their memories of the period. Sexuality was understood to be a visceral, instinctive force driving their actions from somewhere within. This discourse tended to be more prevalent in the testimony of the interviewees who identified as 'liberal' Catholics, those happier to critique and challenge the teachings of the central hierarchy. The 'liberation' stories they narrated were often based on an active separation between their religious beliefs and questions of sex, a process which was identified as the main reason for the survival of their faith. An immanent/transcendent categorisation therefore represented a symbolic convention that ordered the language available to the interviewees at the point of recollection, while also being a process they lived through and consciously reflected on. It was a tension that they confronted on a daily basis in the shared physical spaces and times that sexual and religious activities occupied; bedrooms, evenings, even the bed itself. As the third and fourth chapters demonstrate, these temporal and geographical spaces should not simply be viewed as peripheral details, but constitutive determinants of a particular historical experience.

The interview process also brought into focus the poverty of this discourse when the interviewees attempted to represent the nuances of their sexual and religious experiences. The interviewees stressed the importance of embodied, physical experiences in bringing about their religious 'liberation', rather than the new emancipatory ideologies and texts they came across in the sixties. They worked to communicate what Grace Jantzen might recognise to be an embodied, materialist form of religiosity, informed by corporeal sensibilities.⁷¹ Equally, they worked to communicate a form of sexuality that encompassed the emotional, inter-personal and even mysterious aspects of sexual desire, morality and behaviour. This was not always achieved through articulation. The silences that existed in the interviewees' narratives were not simply the product of 'unavailable' discourses (as oral history practitioners often maintain), but also

⁷¹ Jantzen, *Becoming Divine*, pp.100-119.

represented an appreciation of the ineffable when addressing the relationship between sex and religion.

The immanent/transcendent framework outlined here accommodates the ineffable, spiritual and even ecstatic dimensions of religious and sexual sensibilities which tend to be overlooked in existing accounts of a 'religious crisis'. Historical studies of religious change should not be reluctant to engage with theological and philosophical thought. To do so, is to deny a central component of the subject they address.⁷² Transcendence creates a space within which to integrate larger questions about the meaning and nature of human existence, questions which religion attempts to confront. An ontological framework enables us to dig beneath the artificial rivalries that make up a 'blame game' (was the Church to blame for its own demise or were the forces of 'secularism' responsible) and see how different actors and agencies have been invested in the re-categorisation of sex and religion. What emerges is a messy, manifold and sometimes paradoxical story of personal and institutional change.

Catholicism in post-war England

The interplay between change and continuity has been a central motif in the historiography of post-war Catholicism. Until recently, Michael Hornsby-Smith's extensive sociological research had been the main contribution to the field. Hornsby-Smith used large-sample surveys and opinion polls to argue that the years surrounding the Second Vatican Council (1962-1965) witnessed a number of vital changes in the character and composition of English Catholicism.⁷³ Announced by Pope John XXIII on 25 January 1959 and convened on 11 October 1962, the council drew together over 2,500 bishops from around the world to carry out John XXIII's call for '*aggiornamento*' (translated as 'updating'). The Council eventually ratified sixteen documents that paved the way for reforms in many areas of Catholic life, including the introduction of vernacular language in the Mass, new and more sympathetic relations with other faiths and changes to the Catholic liturgy. While the decrees and declarations of the Council are easily described, and have been elsewhere, their impact and legacy continue to represent a point of contest for scholars of twentieth century Catholicism.⁷⁴ Hornsby-Smith emphasised the fundamental changes that Vatican II invoked and expressed. He described a movement from 'collective-expressive to individual expressive religiosity', whereby Catholic lay people began 'creating their own' personal beliefs and devotional practices as opposed to 'passively receiving

⁷² I do not have a formal academic background in philosophy or theology, but this need not be a problem as I am more interested in the way these ideas worked for what Michael Hornsby-Smith would describe as 'ordinary Catholicism'. M. Hornsby-Smith, Roman Catholics in England, (Cambridge, 1987).

⁷³ Ibid.

⁷⁴ A. Harris, Faith in the Family: A Lived Religious History of English Catholicism, 1945-1982, (Manchester, 2013) p.5

an official spirituality'.⁷⁵ Catholic commentators of both a liberal and orthodox persuasion have followed this line and interpreted the middle of the 1960s as something of a historical watershed for English Catholics, be that as a point of modernising progression or regression away from an apparent 'golden age'.

Alana Harris built on Hornsby-Smith's analysis in her timely addition to the field Faith in the Family (2013), but also diverged from some of his central conclusions. Where Hornsby-Smith emphasised the *changes* that occurred in the lives of 'ordinary' Catholics, Harris stressed the 'little-appreciated elements of continuity' that existed throughout the post-war decades. Her main contention was that Hornsby-Smith drew too sharp a distinction between pre and post conciliar Catholicism –

‘...his description of the change to a ‘more pluralistic set of beliefs in the [more] voluntaristic, post-Vatican Church’ is predicated on a characterisation of the period preceding the 1960s as evincing ‘a relative uniformity of beliefs in a fortress Church’ and the moving of Catholics through social mobility and education out of the ghetto into the mainstream of British society.’⁷⁶

‘Rather than interpreting this period as a period of caesura or rupture, especially through an over-emphasis on the social dislocation of the 1960s, this book reinterprets these movements as modulations or gradual, non-linear modifications of Catholics’ understandings of their identities, beliefs and practices.’⁷⁷

Harris situated her research in the emerging histories of gender and emotion which ‘increasingly assert that change in twentieth-century Britain should be viewed as part of a longer-term continuum (even reaching back into the inter-war period)’⁷⁸ Her work demonstrated that there was no sudden movement away from a ‘ghettoised’, coercive form of Catholicism in the sixties as Hornsby-Smith suggested. Harris’ emphasis on what she termed the ‘*longue duree* of the second half of the twentieth century’ chimes with the approach taken here.⁷⁹ Humanae Vitae was itself a reassertion of an earlier encyclical Casti Connibii (1930) which had initially prohibited the use of artificial means of contraception for Catholics. Casti Connibii was a response to the Lambeth Conference of the Anglican Church in the same year which had approved the use of artificial birth control in certain circumstances. It seems that in the area of

⁷⁵ M. Hornsby-Smith, Roman Catholic Beliefs in England; Customary Catholicism and transformations of religious authority, (Cambridge, 2009) p.60.

⁷⁶ Harris, Faith in the Family, p.41.

⁷⁷ Ibid. p.3.

⁷⁸ Ibid. p.48.

⁷⁹ Ibid. p.6.

marital sexuality, a number of central continuities defined the Catholic Church's ecclesiastical identity throughout the twentieth century.

However, the build-up, backdrop and response to these two papal pronouncements in the 1930s and 1960s were very different. In fact, when we focus on the relationship between Catholic belief systems and the processes of the body at a personal level, something which can be described as a rupture can be evinced in the post-war decades: a fundamental change that superseded many of the continuities that Harris dwelt on. The interviewees I spoke to were eager to stress a significant, historically unprecedented shift in the way they understood religion and its relationship to sex. Like many changes in social history, it was a shift that occurred at different speeds and at different times for different people. Nailing down a tight periodisation like the 'sixties', or even 1963 specifically as Brown does, is therefore unhelpful and ultimately misleading.⁸⁰

This leads to the question of what I mean by 'the post-war'. The compulsion to construct rigid models of temporality is endemic amongst historians of both religious and sexual change. Much like the dynamics of the internal/external debate, this tendency has been exacerbated by the highly polemical culture that has been inherited from a 'Death of God' paradigm. The term 'post-war' is used here to denote the years from 1945 up until the 1980s; the timings of change within and beyond these brackets is elucidated throughout the thesis rather than being presented as a panoptic model. This end-date is not firmly adhered to, although many of the interviewees did identify the seventies as the decade that witnessed the culmination of their religious and sexual development. There is also consideration of the years that preceded the War which were the setting for some of the interviewees' childhood. The 'historical' is therefore treated as a set of constructions which can only be understood in relation to the 'personal', as something that interacted with individual life cycle stages when discussed retrospectively but also experienced contemporaneously.

Thesis structure; memory, life-cycle stage and the pathological diagnosis of religion

This thesis is organised around the idea of the personal and its contingent relationship with the historical. The Catholic Church's attempts to investigate sexual and religious experience in the 1960s were predicated on an understanding of the personal that was peculiar to its historical setting. The second chapter explores this rendering of the personal and the implications it held for the Catholic birth control debate. The remaining chapters use oral testimony to advance an

⁸⁰ Brown, C, 'Sex, Religion, and the Single Woman c.1950–75: The Importance of a 'Short' Sexual Revolution to the English Religious Crisis of the Sixties', *Journal of Social History*, 22, (2011) pp.189- 215.

alternative way of conceptualising the personal in a Catholic context. There was a time when individual human memory was widely derided as a historical resource for its apparent frailties and inaccuracies. Eric Hobsbawm famously dismissed oral history as a ‘remarkably slippery medium for preserving facts’.⁸¹ However, as Penny Summerfield has shown, the last two decades have seen a turnaround in historians’ attitudes towards autobiographical memory, with pre-occupations about ‘representativeness, generalizability, reliability and validity’ being largely left behind.⁸² These supposed frailties do not simply negate the historical fidelity of human memory, but offer a window into the subjective and sometimes enigmatic meanings that are attached to everyday experience. The act of remembering is often described as a process of meaning making, but religious and sexual experiences themselves should be viewed as exercises in the exploration of meaning, morality and personhood. Retrospection therefore shines a light on aspects of these experiences that might have been deemed unimportant or irrelevant at a different historical moment.

The clearest theme that emerged from the interviews was the centrality of life-cycle stage to the interviewees’ sexual and religious development. Just as Claire Langhamer has argued that woman’s experiences and perceptions of leisure in twentieth century England were fundamentally structured along life-cycle lines, so Catholic women’s sexual experiences can only be understood in relation to this lived ‘contextual framework’. Langhamer identified three key stages – youth, courtship and adult life.⁸³ As such, marriage is broadly treated as a single, unified life-cycle stage in much the same way it is in her history of twentieth century love.⁸⁴ This is a prevalent and in many ways intuitive way of conceptualising women’s personal development, but the testimony of the interviewees participating in this study demonstrated that the experiences of Catholic women in post-war England did not fit neatly within this model. Almost all the interviewees spoke of a clear break in their personal sexual development during marriage. This break was often but not always aligned with a change in contraceptive practice – most interviewees tied it in with the uptake of artificial means of contraception and the resulting removal of a fear of pregnancy. A handful remembered this break as being less linked to contraceptive behaviour and more a ‘natural progression’ that came through the passing of time. In both cases, what was emphasised was a ‘liberation’ from the confines of doctrinal obedience and a resulting resolution of the conflicts that had dogged their early married lives. In keeping with this marital partition, the thesis is organised into three life cycle stages with chapters devoted to ‘later marriage’, ‘early marriage’ and ‘early life’.

⁸¹ E. Hobsbawm, *On History*, (London, 1997) p.206.

⁸² P. Summerfield, *Hostage to the Tricks of Memory? Historians and oral history*, (Abstract for paper at Social History Conference, April 2015). A fuller discussion of the criticisms that have been levelled against individual memory as a historical resource is given in the second chapter.

⁸³ C. Langhamer, *Women’s Leisure in England*, (Manchester, 2000).

⁸⁴ C. Langhamer, *The English in Love: the intimate story of an emotional revolution*, (Oxford, 2013).

Of course, these life-cycle stages fell at different times for different people at different historical moments. For example, 'early marriage' tended to start and finish at an earlier age for those married at the start of the sixties than those married at the end of the decade. For the vast majority of the interviewees, the transition from early to later marriage occurred in the 1970s, but there were notable exceptions.⁸⁵ A more detailed picture of how these stages related to age, time and place is given at the start of each chapter, but it should be remembered that these were fluid formulations that were contingent on a range of factors. As Pat Thane and Lynn Botelho point out in their introduction to an edited collection on women and ageing - 'the chief outcome of the scholarship in this field has been to destroy 'old age' as a fixed category, unchanging over time, and to assert its relativity and provisionality.'⁸⁶

These life-cycle stages were both identifiable periods in a person's life that were lived through in a concrete, quotidian sense, but also discursive formulations - topics of discussion that were underpinned by shifting cultural norms and mores. They are treated as such in this thesis. For example, the last chapter on 'Early Life and Pre-marital sexuality' does not work chronologically through childhood, youth and then courtship, but is organised around the key themes and questions that emerged from the interviewees' memories of the period. One section of this chapter deals with 'early life' as a social construction, exploring the way popular psychoanalytical understandings of religiosity and its relationship with childhood have affected Catholic women's experiences in the post-war. In this sense, the thesis merges a thematic approach with a life-cycle stage approach.

At the heart of the thesis are two chapters on the experience of Catholic marriage. The dissonance between early and later marriage was the cornerstone of the interviewees' liberation stories. Early marriage was often remembered as a period of activity and busyness, with little time to reflect on either religious or sexual matters. It was often typified by tensions between sexual fulfilment and religious imperatives which in many cases, led to great emotional, spiritual and physical frustration. Many of the interviewees stressed that it was not until the everyday duties of child rearing had eased off that transformatory personal changes occurred. 'Later marriage' therefore represented the pivotal life cycle stage in the religious and sexual narratives that were recounted. It witnesses the 'discovery', 'creation' or 'realisation' of a new form of identity, a phenomenon that many of the interviewees articulated through the psychological rhetoric of the 'self'.

It is possible that this reading of marital development may have been encouraged by the interviewees' proximity to later marriage – the mental intricacies and nuances of early married

⁸⁵ Anne represented a notable exception, an interviewee who will be discussed in greater depth in chapter 3.

⁸⁶ P. Thane and L. Botelho, Women and Ageing in British Society Since 1500 (Oxford, 2001) p.5.

life are likely to have been less clear than those that were experienced more recently. However, attributing such a trend to the frailties of human memory discounts the selections that are present in remembering and unremembering. Although the religious philosopher Terence Penelhum has postulated that what we do and do not remember may be a matter of chance, this idea has been discredited within the neurosciences and humanities.⁸⁷ The choices inherent in Catholic women's memory represent an important indicator of their marital experience. Furthermore, they reveal a layer of emotional and personal meaning which traditionally 'objective' historical sources are blind to.

When human memory is interpreted as nothing more than a random filter, individual women's capacity to serve as the authors of their own life stories is irrevocably undermined. This constraint will be particularly familiar to religious individuals in a post-war setting. A pathological diagnosis of religion, reinforced by the growing authority of psychoanalytical modes of understanding, has taken hold in the second half of the twentieth century. In academic texts and the wider imagination, childhood has been placed at the centre of 'rationalist' explanations of religious belief.⁸⁸ Religiosity, to a greater degree than any other belief system, ideology or source of identity, has become understood to be the product of indoctrination or psychological programming in a person's early life. Indeed, comments along the lines of 'speak to them about their childhood, that will give you the answer' has been a common response to my project from both academics and non-academics alike. This quasi-Freudian link between religion and infantilism was a conspicuous presence in the interviews; the interviewees adopted elements of it while also actively resisting the association. The final chapter examines the development of this 'infantile hypothesis' in more depth.

The problem with an over-emphasis on the role of childhood in the formation of religious belief systems is that it denies the agency of religious women acting at a later stage of their lives. Their life stories, and through this their identities, are thought to be entirely determined by the intricate details of a period that is distant or unrecognisable to them. This form of determinism is both methodologically and ethically problematic for my research. Aside from anything else, it undercuts the basis of Catholic theology on free will and moral responsibility. To counter this tendency, chapters three to five move through life cycle stages, but do so in reverse. We start with later marriage, move back through early marriage, and finish with youth. As such, the order mirrors the life of F. Scott Fitzgerald's eponymous character Benjamin Button.⁸⁹ Henry Alexander argues that Fitzgerald's story, about a man born with the mental and bodily features of an old man who gradually becomes younger as his chronological age advances, should be

⁸⁷ T. Penelhum, 'Personal Identity' in *Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, vol. 6 (New York, 1972), p. 102.

⁸⁸ The start of Chapter 5 has more details on this indictment, see for example E. Erikson, *Childhood and Society*, (Great Britain, 1951), C. Hitchens, *God Is Not Great*, (New York, 2007) pp.217-228.

⁸⁹ F. Scott Fitzgerald, *The Curious Case of Benjamin Button and other stories of the Jazz Age*, (California, 2008).

interpreted as a lesson in how the 'levels of importance' we attribute to memory can overlap into moral concerns -

'Benjamin Button's life evokes awareness of the breakdown of such levels of importance and of their various claims to a place in memory. His life stresses the disruption and havoc that can emerge when the threads of memory are severed from salient features of a life. It brings out how such severance is an obstacle to change. And by contrast it brings out equally and vividly—what we may have failed to notice because so evident—namely, the importance of the threads of memory to the significance that a person can find in life. By highlighting how forgetfulness damages and dissipates Benjamin Button's topsy-turvy existence, we can grasp how forgetfulness may overlap into moral concerns'.⁹⁰

The levels of importance that the interviewees attached to their different life-cycle stages were shaped by moral concerns, but also borne out of lived experience. Reversing the chronology of their lives allows us to recognise the choices that are being made in the retelling of a life, while also respecting the way this life was made up of lived, transient moments.

This ordering replicates human memory rather than historical narrative. Starting from the point of interview, it works back through the interviewees' lives in a manner not unlike Foucault's genealogies.⁹¹ In this way, the behaviour and decisions of married Catholic women are not attributed to an infantile event or environment, but are viewed as lived moments shaped by individual agency and external structures. Kierkegaard wrote that 'life must be lived forwards, but it can only be understood backwards'.⁹² This musing on the temporality of existence illuminates the problems of oral history research but also its inherent virtues. The act of remembering allows us to think on the paradoxes and constraints of linear time. Working backwards through a life demonstrates how understanding and experience are not distinct from one another for a religious believer, but intimately intertwined. Perversely, working backwards enables a clearer picture of how Catholic women lived forwards.

⁹⁰ H. Alexander, 'Reflections on Benjamin Button', *Philosophy and Literature*, 33, (2009), pp. 1-17.

⁹¹ C. Koopman, *Genealogy as Critique: Foucault and the Problems of Modernity*, (Indiana, 2013).

⁹² M. Strawser, *Both/And: Reading Kierkegaard: from Irony to Edification*, (USA, 1997) p.17.

Chapter 1

Sources, methodology and approach

A range of sources are required to get at an intimate and highly subjective subject like Catholic women's sexual experiences. As such, this thesis engages with original oral testimony, advice literature produced by Catholic authorities as well as formal and familial archive material. This eclectic range of sources offers an insight into both personal experiences and institutional understandings of sexuality, providing a platform from which to reappraise changing power relations within Catholicism. Academic investigators of everyday, 'ordinary' Catholicism have been principally concerned with the relationship between prescription and practice; to what extent did Catholics do what the central Church told them to do?¹ The intention has been to gather sources which allow us to address this question, while also tracing its own historical development in the post-war decades. Concepts such as obedience, moral agency, autonomy and liberation are not simply treated as passive building blocks for my analysis, but historically contingent constructions which map out a changing Catholic culture. The methodology of the thesis is therefore a response to the dominant approaches to sex and Catholicism that have emerged in the second half of the twentieth century, as well as the experiences that were communicated by the individual interviewees.

The evidence presented here has hitherto been unavailable to or untouched by historians. Personal connections within the Catholic community have afforded me access to new and revelatory avenues of research. A number of the interviewees were sourced through social networks reaching out from family members, while I have also been granted access to the unpublished, private archives of central Church organisations on account of personal associations. My own position in this process has therefore been instrumental in not only interpreting but also enabling the production of this research. The following chapter outlines a methodological approach which acknowledges and also integrates the role of the 'personal' in the 'historical process', both as a disciplinary labour and a subject of analysis. The way I choose to interpret my material on sex and religiosity will be historically situated within a trajectory of other intellectual approaches to the topics. The experiences and mentalities of Catholics have been subject to external approaches to Catholicism more in the last sixty years than ever before. I fit myself in this category – an actor 'approaching' the Catholic experience. A reflexive account of my research method is not only 'scientifically' beneficial, but also necessitated by

¹ Hornsby-Smith used the term 'ordinary' Catholics to describe individuals who were less engaged in religious practice and community than 'core' Catholics who participated in church activities and congresses. Hornsby-Smith, *Catholic Beliefs in England*, p.29.

the character of late-modern Catholicism. When dealing with the relationship between sex and religion, the methodological is historical.

Lived religious history and the personal

This project explores the relationship between Catholic belief systems and the processes of the body in post-war England. It focuses on the way this interface has been governed, discussed and understood by intellectual and religious authorities as well as the way it has been experienced by men and women on a day-to-day basis. Drawing on a methodological approach known as ‘lived religious history’, the boundary between these two objects of study will be both elucidated and necessarily dissolved. As Alana Harris says –

‘Such an approach breaks down the dichotomous, structural oppositions, often drawn in studies of ‘popular religion’, between high and low culture, between clerisy and laity, between the public and private. It is, rather, an approach that seeks to chart, through the difficult and imprecise process of searching for new sources, and re-reading old ones with fresh eyes, the ambivalences and contradictions in the beliefs and practices of the ordinary ‘person in the pew’.²

At the heart of the lived religious history project is an emphasis on the blurring of boundaries between Church and laity, institution and peoples. Focusing on the mediated relationship between Catholic individuals and the Church rather than the two in isolation recognises the fluid and historically contingent nature of these categories.

Returning to Harris’ description of lived religious history, the point about ‘fresh eyes’ is one I would like to expand on. Robert Orsi has argued that this approach fundamentally critiques Weberian and Durkheimian explanations of religious change and with this, the constraining academic paradigms surrounding ‘secularisation’ and ‘modernity’.³ Sociological studies of secularisation are criticised for their limited definition of the religious, and this failing is often ascribed to the culture of militarised atheism that is seen to inspire its proponents. Even Brown has chastised the ‘Enlightenment project’ on religion for being ‘spawned by the supposed “neutrality” of social science’.⁴ If lived religious history presents itself as the antidote to these socio-scientific models of religious decline, then the question I am left with is how much

² Harris, *Faith in the Family*, p.15.

³ R. Orsi, ‘Everyday Religion and the Contemporary World: The Un-Modern, or What was Supposed to Have Disappeared but Did Not’ in S. Schielke and L. Debevec (eds.), *Ordinary Lives and Grand Schemes: An Anthropology of Everyday Religion* (Oxford, 2012) 145–61.

⁴ Brown, *The Death of Christian*, p.11.

significance should be placed on the personal belief system of the author. Callum Brown and practitioners of lived religious history both eschew any explicit reflexivity in their analysis. Beyond this, there is little to no trace of the author's theological convictions, even in forewords, acknowledgements and references. Presumably such details are seen as irrelevant to the form, rendering historical analysis mere theo-journalism and thereby diluting the intellectual credentials of the study.

If reflexivity was an academic buzz word twenty years ago, then there has been something of a backlash against the 'reflexive turn' in recent years.⁵ As Michael Lynch points out, reflexivity, whether in the form of 'interpretive reflexivity', 'substantive reflexivity' or 'mechanical reflexivity', has been fetishised somewhat within the academy.⁶ The term has a distinctly sociological flavour to it, with something pseudo-empirical about its intentions. I would place this concept in the more encompassing and yet simpler descriptive of 'the personal'. With this, the subjectivities of researcher and subject are not distinguished from each other through a hierarchical language but held together.

When it comes to matters of religion, and indeed sexuality, the personal cannot be entirely separated from the historical. This is not simply a question of acknowledging the author's subjectivity in an introductory passage, but also recognising the peculiarities of religion and sexuality as subjects of enquiry. Practitioners of Religious Studies have long grappled with the extent to which their subject is exceptional to other pursuits. In recent years, much energy has been spent by historians on the valuable task of trying to resituate religion alongside other social, intellectual and material topics. Sue Morgan and Jacqueline de Vries celebrate the fact that within the field of gender history, religion is re-emerging from decades of neglect to find a space in conference panels and edited collections.⁷ While it is right to emphasise that religion can be studied and understood as a legitimate and immanent historical phenomenon, the tendency to stress its 'normalness' has lead certain authors to overcompensate and neglect its

⁵ For example, Hatch and Wisniewski makes this judgement of reflexivity - 'Based on our review of manuscripts over several years, we see a strong tendency among scholars to reflect on their work and their place in it rather than to do the work ... As a result, and despite the espoused goal of encouraging other voices to be heard, the loudest voice is that of the author.' J Hatch, and R Wisniewski, 'Life history and narrative: questions, issues, and exemplary works', in J Hatch and R Wisniewski (eds.) Life History and Narrative, (London, 1995) p. 131.

⁶ In his article 'Against Reflexivity as an Academic Virtue and Source of Privileged Knowledge' Lynch documents the competing versions of reflexivity that have been proffered by different writers, stating - 'According to this version [of reflexivity], investigations of reflexive organizations of practical actions can lead to deep sociological insight, but 'reflexivity' is not an epistemological, moral or political virtue. It is an unavoidable feature of the way actions (including actions performed, and expressions written, by academic researchers) are performed, made sense of and incorporated into social settings. In this sense of the word, it is impossible to be unreflexive. M. Lynch, 'Against Reflexivity as an Academic Virtue and Source of Privileged Knowledge', Theory, Culture & Society, 17, (2000) pp.26-54.

⁷ S. Morgan and J. de Vries, 'Introduction' in S. Morgan and J. de Vries (eds), Women, Gender and Religious Cultures in Britain, 1800-1940 (London: Routledge, 2010) p.1.

essential 'strangeness'. This thesis seeks to develop a methodology that creates and maintains a space within which religion's 'strangeness' can be articulated.

Timothy Fitzgerald asks what makes religion somehow 'distinct, sui generis, and unique?' The only available answer, according to Fitzgerald, must be its transcendental referent, variously called God, the sacred or the ultimate.⁸ There may be something beyond this meta-physical dimension that sets religion apart in a specifically post-war context though. Charles Taylor argues that in the period after the cultural revolution of the 1960s, described by Taylor as the 'Age of Authenticity', religion has not only moved from an unconscious backdrop to an active choice, but has become something that must satisfy a sense of individualistic spirituality. Finding a place in a Church no longer matters, religious or non-religious identity serves as the ultimate expression of authentic individualism.⁹ The link between religious identity and a sense of self that Taylor forges has found much concurrence amongst sociologists of contemporary religion.¹⁰ This being the case, efforts from the investigator to completely remove any sense of the personal denies a central component of the modern religious subject they are attempting to explore.

The particular conception of the personal that this thesis advances can be seen to have distinctly Catholic colourings. In merging it with authorial reflexivity, a Foucauldian scholar would detect something of the confessional in the call to divulge intimate details of the writer's identity. There is certainly a quasi-spiritual quality to the way this thesis responds to a modern incitement to 'tell everything'.¹¹ But rather than identifying the confessional as a point of reference, my understanding of the personal draws more on the theoretical contributions of Ken Plummer and his notion of 'storytelling'. Plummer maintains that Foucault's model of a modern confessional culture is 'couched at a level of generality – of the deployment of discursive strategies and power/knowledge spirals – which is too opaque'. For Plummer, Foucault provides little space for the generation of particular kinds of stories at particular moments; his strangely undifferentiated model chiefly neglects the rise of mass media in late modernity.¹² Accordingly, the methodology of this study is informed by a process of 'storying' rather than 'confessing'. The stories we tell do not simply give meaning to our interactions with the social world, but also constitute what we consider to be the personal. In the contemporary historical setting, stories do not just make us; they are us.

⁸ T. Fitzgerald, *The Ideology of Religious Studies*, (New York, 2000) p.27.

⁹ C. Taylor, *A Secular Age*, (Harvard, 2007) p.108.

¹⁰ For example see L. Woodhead and P. Heelas, *Religion in Modern Times: An interpretive Anthology*, (Oxford, 2000).

¹¹ Foucault, *History of Sexuality*, pp.17-36.

¹² Plummer, *Sexual Stories*, p.121-123.

Rejecting methodological agnosticism

If we consider the work of the likes of Callum Brown and Linda Woodhead, it is clear that the study of ‘secularisation’ has drawn richly from the theoretical apparatus of gender and cultural theory.¹³ In reciprocation, this thesis asks what historians, particularly historians of sexuality and gender, can learn from the methodology of religious studies. There is a debate in religious studies called the ‘Insider/ Outsider problem’ – George Chrysillius discusses it here –

‘Does one have to be a member of a community for your testimony about that community to be valid? Or does your membership of the community invalidate your objectivity? It is certainly the opinion of a large minority within the academic study of religion that, in the words of Andrew Walls, ‘religion can best understand religion’. For Walls “religious commitment” provides the best “entrance gate” for understanding religion because “it at least presupposes the reality of the subject matter”‘ (in Cox, 2006:154). However, from another perspective a personal religious commitment, whether to the group being studied or another group, can be seen as a hindrance to seeing the social reality of the matter at hand.’¹⁴

In the late 1960s, Ninian Smart proffered the idea of ‘methodological agnosticism’ as the equitable approach for students of religion. Smart contended that the social scientist should study religious beliefs and their effects in society without passing any judgment on the truth or falsity of those beliefs.¹⁵ By extension, he maintained that the investigator’s theological identity should be imperceptible to the reader. Methodological agnosticism served as the dominant practice through the 1970s and 1980s and still holds sway today – as John Cox asserts

‘The idea that academics must adopt a neutral, value-free position with respect to the study of religions and restrict themselves to the tasks of describing, classifying and comparing religious phenomena has come to define even up to today mainstream thinking among scholars of religions within departments of religious studies in Western academic institutions.’¹⁶

The intellectual popularity of such a principle should be understood in the context of its wider historical setting. A Freudian diagnosis of religious commitment continues to hold currency,

¹³ Brown, *The Death of Christian*, L. Woodhead, ‘Gendering Secularization Theory’, *Social Compass*, 55, (2008) p.188.

¹⁴ George Chrysillius, ‘George Chrysillius on the Insider/Outsider Problem’, *Podcast for the Religious Studies Project*, (February 20th 2012).

¹⁵ N. Smart. *The Science of Religion and the Sociology of Knowledge*, (Princeton, 1973) See, for example, R. A. Segal, "Contributions from the Social Sciences," in P. Clayton and Z. Simpson (eds.), *The Oxford Handbook of Religion and Science*, (Oxford, 2006) p.314.

¹⁶ J. Cox, ‘Religion without God: Methodological Agnosticism and the Future of Religious Studies’, The Hibbert Lecture, 13 April 2003, Herriot-Watt University.

and with this, religious modes of understanding are considered to corrupt the legitimacy of dispassionate, intellectual practice.

The virtues of methodological agnosticism have been questioned in recent years - Michael Bourdillon has argued that academic neutrality on religious matters is based on the flawed premise that the scholar of religion can or should exclude personal judgements from academic discourse. Bourdillon contends that 'our personal judgements are relevant to academic debate, and academic debate can affect our personal judgements'.¹⁷ Published in an edited collection that addressed the Insider/Outsider Problem in the Study of Religion in 1999, David Hufford's chapter on the relationship between the personal voice and the scholarly voice concluded that 'because scholars [of belief] are human beings, the study of human life is always and inescapably reflexive.'¹⁸ In popular culture, the veracity agnosticism in a broader sense has become a target. Yann Martell's hugely popular novel Life of Pi and the resulting film include a compelling deconstruction of the rhetorical rationale behind agnosticism.¹⁹ It was in this climate that Charles Taylor felt no qualms about exclaiming in his introduction to A Secular Age - 'I freely confess that my views have been shaped by my own perspective as a believer, but I would also hope to defend them with arguments.'²⁰

Rather than pursuing 'methodological agnosticism', this study advances a methodology that acknowledges the saliency of questions relating to theistic world views, if not the answers provided by Catholic or any other religious doctrine. The distinction between questions and answers is an important one; it is possible to engage with the dialectics of faith without needing to subscribe to an established religious identity. Indeed, my intention to accommodate the questions of faith informs the emphasis on immanence and transcendence through which the thesis is structured. I could be classed as both an insider and an outsider, or perhaps as neither. I do not believe in a Catholic God or creed at the time of writing, but am inspired by a conviction that Catholicism has been unfairly dismissed as irrational and pathologically unmodern. I did though, grow up believing in a Catholic God and theology, albeit a theology that might be described as 'liberal'. For some commentators, the fact that I was brought up a Catholic would go a long way to determining the course of this thesis. For others, the 'liberal' nature of my Catholicism would equally be seen to determine my conclusions. As stated earlier though, this study moves away from such a reading of religiosity as being rooted in childhood indoctrination. The evolution and undulation of my beliefs have continued to shape the form

¹⁷ M. Bourdillon, 'Anthropological approaches to the study of African religion', in J. Platvoet, J. Cox, and J. Olupona (eds.), The study of religions in Africa: Past, present and prospects, (Cambridge, 1996).

¹⁸ D. Hufford, 'The Scholarly Voice and the Personal Voice: Reflexivity in Belief Studies', in Russell McCutcheon (ed.), The Insider/Outsider Problem in the Study of Religion, (London, 1999) p.294.

¹⁹ In short, Martel holds that since the existence of God is essentially unknowable and therefore a matter of belief, agnosticism can not represent a meaningful philosophy or identity. Everyone and no one is agnostic by definition. Y. Martell, Life of Pi, (Edinburgh, 2001).

²⁰ Taylor, A Secular Age, p.10.

and content of this thesis from its inception to its completion. Equally, the research process has recalibrated my own faith, sexuality and the relationship between the two. Reflecting on this circuit places the reader a privileged position when forming his or her own personal responses to the material.

Although the term ‘liberal’ Catholic is a protean descriptor, I use it in this thesis to denote individuals who do not agree with the Church’s teaching on contraceptive morality and the same is true of my own ‘liberal’ identity.²¹ I was encouraged from an early age to question the Church’s absolute authority on a range of matters. In line with this, the project began on the presupposition that the official position of the Church, in terms of the central hierarchy, was really only adjacent to the main concerns of my research. I stated in my research proposal that I wanted to ‘move beyond the well documented Catholic birth control debate’ and focus on the personal religious theologies of Catholic lay men and women. With the widespread acknowledgment that Catholic couples were largely making their own minds up with regards to contractive morality, the Church’s stance appeared to be an irrelevancy. The question of authority was the province of ‘orthodox’ Catholic discourse, a distraction from the real, human matter of the laity’s sexual experience.

In the course of the interview process however, it became apparent that a rigid separation between the Church’s doctrine and personal religiosity was at odds with the Catholic spiritualities that were being represented. The concept of a pastoral Church which held some kind of special knowledge was at the heart of almost all of the interviewee’s religious identities, even if the form this Church took varied greatly. The Church’s teaching on contraception was not an irrelevance to even the most avowedly ‘liberal’ interviewee. Georgina, for example, had disregarded the Church’s teaching in her mid-thirties, explaining that she felt ‘absolutely no guilt whatsoever’ about using the Pill for the remainder of her married life. She did though go on to stress the formative position of the Church in her own sense of religiosity -

‘I do hope and pray that that [the teaching on birth control] will change. Because it matters. Yes for future generations of women but also for me. It is still the Church and the Church is vital to Catholicism, even to my Catholicism. It’s not suddenly an irrelevance’²²

In response, the project’s scope has broadened in terms of content and ambition. The focus has become the *relationship* between individual religiosity and the doctrine of the Catholic hierarchy.

²¹ A further discussion of the definitions of the terms ‘liberal’ and ‘orthodox’ Catholicism is contained in the subsection ‘Definitions and Parameters’.

²² Georgina, Interviewed 22/11/2012.

More than anything else, such a shift represents a change in the project's wider purpose. With the investigations of Andrew Greeley and Lara Marks concluding that Catholic couples have been wilfully disregarding the Church's teaching on contraception for at least fifty years, the question of doctrinal change has been seen to be 'put to bed' so to speak.²³ However, this thesis now attempts to reignite the apparently dormant birth control debate by historicising its emergence in decades after the War. As the second chapter shows, *Humanae Vitae* represented a rejection of a highly intellectualised, theological case for change. This case was peculiar to the historical moment it was constructed within, reflecting dominant understandings of both sex and religion in the 1960s. The arguments of both 'liberal' and orthodox' actors centred on the question of whether the principal function of sex was pleasure or procreation.²⁴ The 'primary' and 'secondary' purposes of sex was an ethical binary that underpinned Pope Paul's Encyclical and continues to structure contests within the Catholic community. The intention here is to move beyond this conjectural dichotomy. The personal testimony of individual Catholic women holds the potential to reframe a case for change and the contours of the debate in general. If the material sourced here is to have any function in the birth control debate, whether deployed in protest or indeed support of the hierarchy's stance, then the transparency of the author's personal prejudices and sentiments should be considered a virtue.

This study rejects agnosticism as both a personal theology and methodological virtue. This project was inspired by the realisation that my personal story could be mapped on to a collective, historical story. My sexual 'awakening' in teenage years coincided with moving away from and eventually renouncing Catholicism. While being conscious of this parallel, I did not see any causal connection between the two. I was though interested to learn that the dominant, historical way of thinking about religious decline at a national level adhered to this very story. James Hinton describes his work *Nine Wartime Lives*, as a 'sounding board for his own puzzles about the meaning of life', and admits that the way in which the stories have been framed reflects the 'unresolved muddles of my own selfhood'.²⁵ As is the case with Hinton, my intention is not merely therapeutic expression, but to lay bare the personalised dialogue between researcher and subject so as to augment the reader's place in this tripartite relationship.

The use of oral history

This study draws on a range of sources in its examination of the personal and institutional history of postwar Catholicism, but its main contribution to the field lies in its use of original,

²³ L. Marks, *Sexual Chemistry: A History of the Contraceptive Pill*, (London, 2001), A. Greeley, 'The Sexual Revolution in the Catholic Clergy', *Review of Religious Research*, 14, (1973) p.93.

²⁴ For a further discussion of both liberal and orthodox positions on the function of sex, see S. Cornwall, *Theology and Sexuality*, (London, 2013) p. 89.

²⁵ J. Hinton, *Nine wartime Lives*, (Oxford, 2012) p.199.

first hand oral interviews. Much of the historical literature on modern Catholicism has focused on the public pronouncements of the central hierarchy. Attempts to examine the social make up and character of the Catholic laity have followed the lead of Hornsby-Smith's detailed quantitative analysis.²⁶ The intention with this project was to explore how qualitative, oral testimony might provide an alternative means of getting at personal religious beliefs. The emphasis on the personal outlined above informed my research method throughout the project. It also lies at the heart of the intervention I intend to make in existing debates about oral history methodology.

Oral testimony will be used to provide an insight into the discursive, experiential and spiritual dimensions of religious faith. In reciprocation, the subject of religious faith is used as a prism through which to explore methodological questions relating to the use of oral history. In short, these well-trodden debates take on a renewed significance when talking about religion. The leading theorist and practitioner of oral history research Penny Summerfield has identified two contrasting approaches to oral history. Firstly, that of the social historian; where personal testimony is valued for the insight it can offer into the lived experiences of a particular neglected group. Secondly, that of the cultural historian which focuses on the discourses, cultural constructs and ideologies that shape or even construct human memory.²⁷ But to what extent are the two approaches mutually exclusive? According to Anna Green, Summerfield does not engage with the question of how and why individuals adopt specific perspectives.²⁸ Surely it is possible to look at the 'stories', 'myths' and 'cultural scripts' that individuals draw on in the way they compose their narrative forms while simultaneously treating their testimony as providing an insight into an actual lived experience.

Oral historians employing a deconstructionist methodology tend to treat the interviewees' testimony as a text which is shaped by discourses well beyond the subject's consciousness.²⁹ In this way, a growing emphasis on the discursive is a testament to the continuing authority of psychoanalytical thought within oral history practice. Unpicking layers of consciousness is certainly part of the oral historian's job, but oral testimony also provides us with information with which to reimagine moments of temporal experience. As we shall see, the physical time and space these moments occurred within were particularly stressed by Catholic women. Ben Jones has pointed out that in social history more generally, the experiential has taken a hammering since the so called 'linguistic turn'. As Jones argues, the textual deconstructionism

²⁶ Hornsby-Smith, Roman Catholic Beliefs.

²⁷ P. Summerfield, 'Culture and Composure: Creating Narratives of the Gendered Self in Oral History Interviews', Cultural and Social History, 1, (2004) pp. 65 – 93.

²⁸ A. Green, 'Individual and "Collective" Memory: theoretical presuppositions and the contemporary debates', Oral History, 32,(2004) pp. 35-44.

²⁹ For example, Green objects to the deployment of psychological theories in a 'cultural determinist' way when it comes to oral history, arguing that a preoccupation with 'unconscious psychic templates' has downplayed the significance of individual remembering. A. Green, 'Individual and "Collective" Memory', p.40.

of Joan Scott among others has narrowed the horizons of historical practice - 'leaving open the question of how subjects mediate, challenge, resist or transform discourses'.³⁰ The problem with relegating the experiential to a mere function of discourse is that it can overlook the essence of what the interview respondent is choosing to emphasise. The interviewees' testimony included descriptions of joy, hope, desire and physical pleasure. They also included vivid descriptions of suffering, frustration and loss. As we shall see, these emotions were at the centre of the stories of painstaking contraceptive decisions, changing spiritualities and sexual experiences that were being depicted. Oral history, when deployed with the appropriate methodological provisions, can resurrect these neglected drivers of personal and collective change. The tendency to 'textualise' interview responses robs oral history of its capacity to uncover the 'structures of feeling' to misuse a phrase of Raymond Williams, and down plays the role of corporeal and emotive sensibilities. In this sense, my methodological approach borrows from the growing body of research on the history of emotions, a field which has expanded almost exponentially in the last ten years.³¹

Reviving the experiential for religious subjects of oral history research is a quest which holds significant implications for questions of individual agency. Summerfield locates women's wartime testimony within a matrix of publicly available discourses, but Green points out that there is not much room for the self-reflective individual in Summerfield's analysis, rejecting the 'capacity of interviewees to see into the inner processes of the self, specifically to perceive internal changes across time and attribute them to identifiable causes'.³² Indeed, Brown credits his 'discursive analysis' of oral history to his reading of Summerfield's key work Reconstructing Women's Wartime Lives (1998).³³ Rather than simply treating the stories that are relayed as 'cultural scripts' or 'mental templates' as has become commonplace amongst oral historians, I follow the advice of both Green and Jones and focus on the question of how and why the respondents select, critique, and reassemble these dominant narratives. By attending to the specific details that the respondents choose to emphasise when elucidating their decisions, the agency of individual Catholic women, who are commonly taken to be passive victims of indoctrination or psychological programming, will be placed at the centre of this paper's analysis. Such an approach accommodates Catholic beliefs on the principle of moral responsibility, thereby recognising a crucial dimension of religious personhood.

³⁰ B. Jones, The working class in mid-twentieth Century England, (Manchester, 2012) p. 48.

³¹ J. Plamper, The History of Emotions: An Introduction, (Oxford, 2015) pp.40-67.

³² A. Green, 'Individual and "Collective" Memory', pp. 35-44.

³³ Brown, Death of Christian, p.203.

Beyond representation; research methods

Twenty six interviews were conducted with twenty-two Catholic women and four Catholic men. The interviewees all identified as Catholic bar one who described herself as ‘culturally Catholic’ but not a ‘true believer anymore’.³⁴ The project was essentially about women’s experience, but men were also consulted to give an alternative insight into married life. The men were spoken to about their own experiences in the same way as the women, but this was always with the aim of understanding how gender worked in relation to Catholic marriage. The decision to focus on femininity was a response to Brown’s model of religious change as well as the centrality of gender to discussions about and within cotemporary Catholicism. A project that apportioned equal attention to husbands and wives or one that looked at Catholic masculinities would make a valuable source of future research, but it would be an essentially different undertaking to the one presented here.³⁵

The issue of representativeness has consistently been viewed as a stumbling block for not just the oral historian, but expositors of qualitative research in general. In one sense, it is these very subjectivities that are of interest; I intend to unpick the way religious individuals construct a life story and through this a subjective sense of self. The evidence sourced here does not claim to be representative of the entire Catholic experience in the post-war. This notwithstanding, efforts were made to incorporate individuals from a range of social and religious backgrounds, covering variants such as class, geography, race, age and the rural/urban divide. These efforts were largely successful. In terms of geographical variants, the interviewees hailed from a range of locations up and down the country. There was a slight weighting in favour of the south-east as this was where the researcher was based, but towns in the north of England with traditionally large immigrant Catholic communities such as Bolton, Liverpool and Manchester were also represented.

Inevitably there were some slight imbalances in the composition of the sample. When researching a sensitive subject like sex, the fear would be that only a self-selecting minority with special characteristics would be comfortable discussing such topics. The interviewees were, of course, only representative of individuals who were willing to talk about such matters to a researcher. It is though possible to limit any ‘distortions’ that might be seen to be produced

³⁴ Michaela, interviewed 07/04/2013.

³⁵ Some research into Catholic masculinities in the post-war period has begun to emerge. See A. Harris, “The People of God Dressed for Dinner and Dancing”? English Catholic Masculinity, Religious Sociability and the Catenian Association” in L. Delap and S. Morgan (eds.), Men, Masculinities and Religious Change in Twentieth Century Britain, (Cambridge, 2013) pp. 54-89.

by the sample.³⁶ This included thinking about the audiences to whom the project was exposed and how this exposure was achieved. The respondents were elicited in a number of ways – through advertising in national and local Catholic newspapers and magazines, notices in local parish notice boards, newsletters and group emails within Catholic organisations and societies, personal contacts notably from family members and then from existing networks branching out from these contacts. The same project description was used every time and is detailed in Appendix A.

It was likely that many of these spaces and networks would have been frequented more by middle-class Catholics. As a result, the sample is slightly weighted in favour of individuals from middle to upper middle class backgrounds. This should not necessarily be viewed as a limitation of the research – the history of sexuality as a discipline has been somewhat over-occupied with attempts to penetrate ‘the working class experience’ to date.³⁷ Nevertheless, ten of the twenty six interviewees described themselves as ‘working class’. A range of socio-economic backgrounds were represented within the material which allowed for some examination of the way class intersected with sexual behaviour and beliefs. However, the intention of the project was never to classify the beliefs of individual women along class or any other lines in a manner akin to that of Hornsby-Smith. A comprehensive commentary on the variations between groupings such as ‘cradle Catholics’ and converts, Irish immigrants and English Catholics has been attempted before.³⁸ The way these variants shaped Catholic experiences in the post-war is touched on at various points in the body of thesis, but does not constitute a major priority here.

The only clear disparity that existed in the composition of the sample related to the interviewees’ politicised identity within Catholicism. As stated earlier, almost all the interviewees chose to describe themselves as either ‘liberal’ or ‘orthodox’. The number of ‘liberals’ outnumbered the ‘orthodox’ interviewees twenty-one to five. There is more than one potential explanation for this trend. It could be suggested that the liberal interviewees would have been more naturally predisposed to speak about sexual matters, be that because of a

³⁶ In reference to the Mass Observation Project, Annabella Pollen has argued that the self-selective nature of qualitative samples need not be viewed as a ‘distortion’ at all - ‘Rather than seeing self-selection as a weakness, and despite continuing positivist pressures, some users of the MOP, have argued that the ‘volunteered’ nature of the material is, in fact, one of its unique strengths... The desire to write for MO has been described as ‘an autobiographical impulse’, but the archival nature of the project clearly also attracts those with a historical consciousness. Correspondents give generously of their thoughts, feelings, experiences and opinions in part because they enjoy the process as self-developmental or even therapeutic, but also, at times, as a kind of social altruism, as an oppositional ‘ordinary’ voice against ‘official’ culture.’ This was also true of many of the participants in my research; Catholics who were highly informed and keenly aware of their own position in wider ecclesiastical politics. A. Pollen, ‘Research Methodology in Mass Observation Past and Present: ‘Scientifically, about as valuable as a chimpanzee’s tea party at the zoo’?, *History Workshop Journal*, 75, (2013), pp. 213-235.

³⁷ Kate Fisher’s research is the only oral history project that looks directly at the intersection of class and sexual experience and this work focuses on working class respondents. There has not yet been an oral history study which specifically focuses on the sexual experiences of middle or upper class communities. Fisher, *Sex, Marriage and Birth Control*.

³⁸ Hornsby-Smith, *Roman Catholic Beliefs*.

comfort with the subject or the motivation to voice dissent. It is dangerous to start artificially profiling 'liberal' and 'orthodox' Catholics in this way though. What was apparent from the interviews was that motivation for participation and a willingness to talk about sex did not correlate neatly with 'liberal' or 'orthodox' categories. It could also be suggested that the project was advertised in spaces that were more exposed to the 'liberal' community. This would be true of the initial four respondents who were sourced through personal association with my grandfather (a figure who will be discussed further in the next section). However, as it became apparent that 'orthodox' women could be underrepresented in the sample, active efforts were taken to engage with this community. This included placing adverts in more 'traditionally minded' publications like the Catholic Herald, contacting women's organisations of a similar persuasion and asking existing interviewees if they knew of any potential 'orthodox' participants.

The final explanation for why there were more liberal than orthodox interviewees is that this discrepancy simply reflected the composition of the contemporary Catholic community. In fact, the special efforts that were taken to reach out to orthodox individuals suggest that they could have been over-represented in the sample. Recent survey data seems to support this idea.³⁹ However, it should be stated again that this thesis makes no claims to be quantifiably representative of English Catholicism. While there remains room for further research into the 'orthodox' Catholic experience, the focus on women who identify as 'liberal' Catholics is not a limitation of the thesis but the very thrust of its intervention. Putting aside for a moment the 'liberal' and 'orthodox' dichotomy of the birth control debate, my overarching aim is to interrogate what 'liberation' meant to Catholic individuals and institutions in a post-war context.

Along with representativeness, the other main challenge that has been levelled against oral history research relates to the frailties of human memory. The age of the interviewees, ranging between 58 and 84, mean that this challenge is particularly germane to my research. When recalling details of everyday life from a period of up to seventy years ago, 'accuracy' will always be seen to be an issue. Coupled with this, the changing ideas and discourses surrounding sex, gender and sexual morality that have emerged in the intervening years will affect and perhaps even reformulate individuals' representation of their behaviour. In response to these criticisms, Paul Thompson has asserted that the deterioration of memory can equally apply to days, even hours after an event as it can years and decades. Thompson speaks of individuals reaching a stage of 'life review' in their latter years which enables them to retrieve memories

³⁹ A recent YouGov Poll found that 9 out of 10 Catholics support the wide availability of artificial contraception. Referenced in 'Most Catholics Support Abortion and Use of Contraception' The Independent, 19 September 2010, accessed at <http://www.independent.co.uk/news/uk/home-news/most-uk-catholics-support-abortion-and-use-of-contraception-2083291.html>.

with a renewed clarity.⁴⁰ Although it would be difficult to verify the benefits of a period of ‘life review’, the deterioration of memory is itself a process which is not devoid of social and personal meaning. It is precisely because of these meanings that the case of Benjamin Button seems so compellingly ‘curious’.⁴¹ As such, the aspects of the past that are remembered, or perhaps more the way these aspects are remembered, can give the historian material to work with. The emphasis that Catholic women placed on later marriage when remembering their sexual development was a key dimension of their life stories and continuing Catholic identities. Reversing the order of the interviewees’ chronological lives allows us to reflect on the way memory and experience intersect in the production of meaning.

Regardless of whether elderly interviewees can offer a more accurate view of the past as Thompson maintains, their age allows for other benefits when discussing religious topics. Pierre Bordieau, among others, has spoken of the interview itself as a spiritual exercise.⁴² Robert Atkinson has similarly written on the ‘gift of narrative’, pointing out that in the telling of stories we enter a sacred realm wherein a reverence towards life is awakened in both those who express and those who receive. This is particularly the case when elderly individuals speak to a young researcher, according to Atkinson.⁴³ The perspective of old age can then open up the spiritual dimensions of a person’s life narrative. Shivaun Woolfson has developed what she refers to a ‘multi-dimensional approach’ in her exploration of the Lithuanian Jewish experience in the twentieth century. Woolfson set out to salvage the spiritual aspects of experience that tend to be neglected in traditional life history methods, drawing on the Hasidic belief that everything in the material world – stories, places, objects - has meaning and melody.⁴⁴ Correspondingly, my own research method seeks to access religious spiritualities by placing the Catholic belief in free will at its heart. In the transmission of a remembered life, the researcher and respondent confront their shared mortality together and, in so doing, create a unique resource for the historian of religion.

The relationship between interviewer and interviewee

The thesis is based on a set of original, first-hand interviews carried out by the author in person. The most common question that arose at academic conferences when presenting the research concerned the role of the interviewer. It tended to boil down to –

⁴⁰ P. Thompson, *Voice of the Past: Oral History*, (Oxford, 2000) ebook Ch. 5.

⁴¹ F. Scott Fitzgerald, *The Curious Case of Benjamin Button and other stories of the Jazz Age*, (California, 2008).

⁴² P. Bordieau, *The Weight of the World: Social Suffering in Contemporary Society*, (Cambridge, 2006) p.614.

⁴³ R. Atkinson, *The Life Story Interview*, (USA, 1998).

⁴⁴ S. Woolfson, *The experience of Lithuanian Jews*. PhD Thesis (Sussex).

‘Why do you think these elderly Catholic women will speak to you, a young male, about these sensitive sexual topics?’

The gender and age of the interviewer were identified as the key barriers to the completion of the research. It is important to acknowledge that these factors would have undoubtedly shaped the interviewees’ testimony in some way. There are a set of questions relating to my own identity as a young, unmarried, actively heterosexual male that I have to be conscious of both in the interview, but also in analysing the material afterwards. For example, the gender and age discrepancy might be seen to contribute to or even account for what some oral historians have described as ‘silences’ in the interviewees’ narrative. Certainly, my own characteristics would have affected what the interviewees were and were not happy to talk about. However, any interviewer would have to confront a certain set of questions based on his or her own identity. An elderly woman, for example, would have to think about the way their own proximity to the experiences being discussed might introduce an element of comparison. A female interviewer would equally have to think about how gendered codes of respectability might shape the details that a respondent was willing to disclose, or at least the manner in which these details were divulged. Alessandro Portelli has found that similarity between interviewer and interviewee can serve to ‘paralyze dialogue’.⁴⁵ It is possible to view the gender and age of the interviewer as features of the interview dynamic without seeing them as determining. This, after all, would be making assumptions about the interviewee’s own disposition.

When discussing the effect of the interviewer’s identity, the word ‘questions’ rather than ‘problems’ is used advisedly. A distance between the researcher and subject can also serve as a palpable benefit. Kate Fisher’s extensive oral history project Birth Control, Sex and Marriage in Britain, 1918-1960 represents something of a blueprint for this research.⁴⁶ Fisher outlined the way that her own identity as a young, unmarried woman could encourage elderly male interviewees to ‘educate her naivety’ and this perception of ignorance sometimes even served as the initial motivation for participation. The justification given by one of Fisher’s male respondents for speaking to her ‘I don’t think you, you really understand how we lived’ is one that was replicated in various forms by a number of my interviewees.⁴⁷ There were instances where my own unfamiliarity with the experiences being discussed also served as a comfort for the interviewee -

⁴⁵ A. Portelli, A Dialogical Relationship. An Approach to Oral History, Online article, accessed from http://www.swaraj.org/shikshantar/expressions_portelli.pdf.

⁴⁶ K. Fisher, Birth Control, Sex and Marriage in Britain, 1918-1960, (Oxford, 2006).

⁴⁷ Fisher, Birth Control, p.xi.

‘I have not really talked about this with my friends or anyone really because I’d be worried they would say ‘It wasn’t like that for me!’... That’s probably why I’m happy to talk to you, you wouldn’t know about things like this’⁴⁸

The shared knowledge of the interviewer’s essential difference often created an atmosphere conducive to open and frank discussion where the interviewee felt a sense of control and ownership over the subject matter.

There were also questions relating to the familiarity of interviewer and interviewee in this project. My grandfather, Professor John Marshall, was a prominent figure in the Catholic community and was familiar to some of the respondents as a CMAC counsellor and chairman, author of Catholic sex manuals and commentator in Catholic newspapers. Five of the interviewees were in fact contacted through personal affiliation with my grandfather. This could be seen to have had a number of effects on the course of the interview. The familial tie gave the interviewer a sense of legitimacy and encouraged an atmosphere of trust which was conducive to candid dialogue. The social connection between interviewer and interviewee could equally be seen to distort the testimony. The interviewee could feel reluctant to divulge certain details, particularly with regards to sexual behaviour, to a source that was in some way linked to them outside of the research context. Listening back on the interview recordings, it is difficult to detect what, if any effect this association might have had. What is important is that this dynamic was acknowledged prior to the interviews and steps were taken to negate its impact. The interviewees were briefed on the rigorous ethical review process that had been carried out. It was also stressed that their anonymity would be preserved throughout the process, and that the interviewer was bound by institutional and legal codes of practice.

Ethical concerns were not simply addressed in the mandatory Ethical Review Form at the outset of the project, but interwoven throughout the research process. All the respondents received an information sheet giving details about the research after they first responded to an advert. If further interest was expressed, the respondent then received a written questionnaire which outlined the kind of questions the interview would involve while also providing me with some preliminary information about the respondent. If the respondent was happy to go ahead at this stage, a face-to-face interview was arranged. There were thirty eight responses to the advertising in total of which only one expressly declined to proceed to interview (only twenty six were interviewed due to limitations on time and resources). No reason was given in this instance. Where there were concerns about the nature of the research, the most effective response was to explain and elucidate my own personal interest in the research. It was not simply that this information allayed potential reticence from the interviewee, but it actively encouraged a sense

⁴⁸ Mary, interviewed 25/09/2012.

of collaborative endeavour which promoted fuller and deeper reflection. As Alessandro Portelli asserts, 'oral history is primarily a listening art', but sometimes to listen more productively the oral historian must speak.⁴⁹ If my own views and experiences were going to shape the way the interviewee's testimony would eventually be interpreted, then it was not only ethically just but also methodologically advantageous to share these details at the point of interaction.

What was not asked about by academic conference delegates was the significance of my own religious identity. Presumably a principle of methodological agnosticism was assumed, rendering religious sentiments irrelevant to the interview process. The interviewees however almost always enquired about my own position in relation to the Catholic faith. For some, this information was a necessary prerequisite for participation and was brought up at an early point of contact. For others, it was a question that came out in the course of our dialogue. Sharing this information with the respondent would certainly have had an effect on their responses, but this effect varied from person to person. In some cases, it led the interviewee to see the interview as an opportunity to bring back a 'prodigal son', while many respondents blessed the project and said that it would feature in their prayers.⁵⁰ What was clear is that the dynamics of the 'insider/outsider debate' were present at the point of interview. In discussing my own religious sentiments, the interviews were typified by a mutual knowledge of the other that broke down reservations and status hierarchies.

There was another element of the interviewer's identity that was not picked up on by conference audiences or even myself initially; that of the academic investigator, specifically the academic investigator of religion. As I introduced the main themes of the research to Lynn at the start of our interview, she asked why I was interested in such a project. After explaining the issues I had with the existing literature and my own personal and familial affiliation with the topic, Lynn pointed out '... and you want a PhD'.⁵¹ Although I had not seen my research as an acquisitive endeavour, I realised that it might seem self-serving and in some sense was. There is a particular tradition of academic interrogation of Catholic 'subjects' that might unsettle a potential interviewee. Patricia for example wanted reassurance that the project would not be like the BBC4 documentary 'Catholics' which had recently aired. There were some within the Catholic community who regarded the series as exploitative, framing interviews with Catholic women in particular in a manner that was misleading to both viewer and participant.⁵² It was important that I attempted to distance myself from such a tradition, while also acknowledging that my

⁴⁹ A. Portelli, *A Dialogical Relationship*, p.1.

⁵⁰ Patricia, interviewed 03/05/2013.

⁵¹ Lynn, interviewed 12/04/2012.

⁵² The point should be made that many in the Catholic community welcomed the series. The Catholic Herald's review ran under the title 'Thank you, BBC, for a sympathetic portrayal of our faith'. It stated 'Given the validity of the regular criticisms against the BBC – that it invariably shows a Left-wing, secularist bias and so on – I was agreeably surprised to find none of this displayed in BBC4's hour-long programme last night', *The Catholic Herald*, 24th February 2012.

identity as an ‘intellectual investigator of religion’ was an inescapable feature of the interview dynamic. The ‘academic gaze’ has been a perennial presence in the story of post-war Catholicism – from sociologists in the 1960s to Brown at the start of the twenty-first century, Christian women’s sexuality has become a major point of interest for intellectual authorities. The approaches to the subject taken by these academics, much like my own, has been coloured by historically specific definitions of both sex and religion.

Definitions and parameters

There is a need to clarify the meaning and parameters of some of the key terms that are used in this thesis. The first set of parameters which require attention are the geographical boundaries of the study. The main focus is on England as this is where the vast majority of the interview respondents lived during their marriages. There are a few notable exceptions - included in the sample is one interviewee from Scotland, one from Northern Ireland, one who spent most of her married life in Wales and another who grew up in France. There is then some potential for extending the parameters of the analysis to include a consideration of national variations, but only in a cautious manner. Particularly in the cases of Ireland and Scotland, the Catholic experience had a very distinctive character shaped by social, political and sectarian contexts which make comparisons over a national plane problematic. While Brown’s model paid particular attention to Scotland (which was the setting of his initial publications on religion), a focus on English Catholicism opens up alternative points of discussions for the study of religious change in Britain.⁵³

The second set of terms which need to be unpacked in relation to Catholicism are ‘liberal’ and ‘orthodox’. While Hornsby-Smith recognised the poverty of clear and distinct labels like ‘liberal’ and ‘orthodox’, Harris contended that he simply replaced this form of categorisation with a similar ‘issues-based’ classification of personal identity –

‘In characterising the movement from ‘collective-expressive’ to ‘individual-expressive’ religiosity or, as described in more recent work, from ‘religio-ethnic identity to one of voluntary religious commitment’, Hornsby-Smith was dealing with ‘ideal types’ and dichotomous distinctions, rather than the more fluid, gradual, and sometimes contradictory transformations and modulations of identity described in the chapters that follow.⁵⁴

⁵³ C. Brown, *Religion and Society in Scotland since 1707*, (Edinburgh, 1997).

⁵⁴ Harris, *Faith in the Family*, p. 41.

Certainly the liberal/orthodox binary is an oversimplified way of understanding the heterodox subjectivities that made up personal Catholic belief systems. However, the problematic nature of these descriptors should not lead us to eschew them all together. They offer us something to work with. The intention here is to examine what this ‘liberal’ identity meant to Catholics, unpacking the ideas and assumptions that lay beneath it in the process. After all, almost all the interviewees chose to describe themselves as either ‘liberal’ or ‘orthodox’, unprompted by a direct question from the interviewer. There was overlap between members of the two groups on many issues such as abortion, female priests, liturgical reform, but birth control represented a clear point of delineation. Interviewees who identified as ‘orthodox’ believed the central Church was right about the intrinsic immorality of birth control, those who identified as ‘liberal’ did not. The relationship between the development of politicised Catholic identities and the question of contraceptive morality represents a central line of enquiry in the fourth and fifth chapters on marriage. As it was a discourse taken up by the interviewees, I use the terms ‘liberal’ and ‘orthodox’ to denote the interviewee’s stance towards contraceptive morality at the point of interview.

Finally, and perhaps most pressingly, the term ‘Church’ requires attention. An integral part of the problem with the ‘internal/external’ debate is the fixed demarcation of the ‘Church’ which its exponents draw.⁵⁵ Brown and McLeod are not alone in this sense. The term ‘Church’ is regularly taken to mean the Pope and the central hierarchy, if not the clergy at a grassroots level. Cardinal Lestapis’ declaration in 1960 that the female orgasm was essentially ‘non-human’ and that sexual satisfaction for a woman could only truly be achieved through contact with semen represents the sort of statement that has been dwelt on by social commentators.⁵⁶ Pronouncements like this are commonly taken to represent the Church’s ‘official’ position on the female orgasm by virtue of their clerical origin, whereas the offerings of Catholic laypeople, recognised and commissioned by the Holy See, continue to be almost entirely neglected.⁵⁷

This definition of the ‘Church’ is ahistorical. In the decades after the Second World War, debates over the constitution of the Church which had been circulating in Catholic thinking for centuries found explicit articulation within the walls of the Vatican. Responding to calls for reform, Pope John XXIII established the Second Vatican Council in 1962 in an attempt to ‘bring the Church up to date with the modern world’. Never before in the Church’s history had members of the laity been consulted on matters of doctrinal change. On the 18th November 1965, Pope Paul VI affirmed the ‘Apostolate of the Laity’ which recognised the essential role of

⁵⁵ Brown, *The Death of Christian*, McLeod, *Religious Crisis*.

⁵⁶ P. Harris, *On Human Life*, (London, 1968) p.68.

⁵⁷ The term Holy See refers to the Pope and the Roman Curia - the central government of the Roman Catholic Church.

the lay community and enshrined this definition of a more decentralised and less hierarchical Church in the annals of the Catholic Order. It has been variously asserted by a collection of ecclesiastical commentators that this marked the point at which the Church transitioned from an authoritarian super-structure to the ‘collegiate body’ it is thought to be today.⁵⁸ There are many that would go further and maintain the ‘Church’ now refers to nothing less than the entire ‘people of God’.⁵⁹ As will be discussed further in the following chapter, the meaning and definition of the term ‘Church’ has become a point of contest which often reflects particular ideas and assumptions about the nature of Catholicism, be they from politicised disputes within the Catholic community or external intellectual critiques. What is clear is that it is anachronistic to simply define the ‘Church’ in terms of the clerical hierarchy and in opposition to the laity.

This thesis adopts a broader, historically specific definition of the term Church which encompasses the new organs of Catholic authority that were created in the post-war years. The Papal Commission for Birth Control 1962-1965 and the Catholic Marriage Advisory Council (established 1946) represent two such organs. For the purposes of communication, the phrase ‘central hierarchy’ will be used to denote the Vatican and its teaching elite, a group that has come to be known to some as the Magisterium.⁶⁰ The next chapter assesses the way female sexuality was constructed by different agencies and actors within the Church during the 1960s. It looks beyond and beneath Humanae Vitae, showing the interactions that existed between secular and institutional understandings of sex. As such, it underlines the need to recognise the shifting and sometimes blurred boundaries that existed between ‘Church’ and ‘peoples’ when assessing the relationship between sexual and religious change.

⁵⁸ For an example see M. Hornsby-Smith, An Introduction to Catholic Social Thought, (Cambridge, 2006).

⁵⁹ H. Kung, The Catholic Church, (Michigan, 2001).

⁶⁰ R Kaiser, The Encyclical that never was, (London, 1989) p.34.

Chapter 2

The Catholic Church's understanding of female sexuality

On the 8th February 1964, eleven clergymen, six physicians and one economist gathered in an unheated conference room overlooking Rome. It had been almost a year since Pope John XXIII had tasked the group with preparing a response to the UN's involvement in programmes of active population control - it seemed the Commission was moving further away from achieving its brief.¹ When a little-known Belgian Canon named Pierre de Locht suggested that the primary ends of marriage could entail something beyond procreative purposes, papal theologian Fr. Bernhard Häring retorted 'But you are talking about questions of fundamental theology!' A pensive De Locht replied 'I suppose I am'. After a hushed pause, the group's secretariat suggested they should break for coffee - the Commission members separated into groups to discuss the implications of what had been said, De Locht paced the balcony clutching his rosary.²

Häring had, in fact, understated the significance of De Locht's challenge; it called in to question not only the content of Catholic sexual theology, but also the processes through which this theology was constructed. At its inception, the Papal Commission for Birth control (1962-65) had been expected to provide the Holy See with a response that accorded with the Church's existing teachings: the primary purpose of sex was procreation and the use of any artificial means to prevent conception was deemed 'intrinsically evil'. In response to De Locht's entreaty in that marbled conference room, Pope Paul VI extended the Commission in terms of brief and membership. It was now afforded full licence to scrutinise the Church's doctrine on birth control and if necessary, reformulate the Catholic understanding of human sexuality. To this end, the Commission expanded to sixty four members, calling in leading experts from the new intellectual disciplines that had come to redefine the sexual in the preceding decades. Specialists were drawn from established fields like biology, medicine and theology, but a particular emphasis was placed on engaging with the 'new sciences of man' such as sociology, anthropology, psychology and psychoanalysis. The process of 'taking in' the expertise of these secular fields implicitly repositioned the Church in relation to its own epistemology and moral authority. The Commission's very existence was based on the principle that sex represented a

¹ The Commission was not initially established for the purpose of doctrinal scrutiny. The Commission was set up by the 'Office of the Secretary of State' in the Vatican, the department that dealt with the Vatican's administrative and political relationships with other international bodies, rather than the 'Holy Office' (later renamed 'The Congregation for the Doctrine of Faith') that dealt with doctrinal matters.

² Interview with Commission member Professor J. Marshall 12/5/2011, this exchange is also alluded to in Robert Kaiser's informative but avowedly journalistic account of the Commission. R. Kaiser, *The Encyclical that Never Was*, (London, 1987) p.74.

subject to be understood rather than an object to be known, a fundamental departure from the Church's traditional stance.

If the Catholic hierarchy suddenly decided in the 1960s that elements of sexual experience fell beyond the bounds of its existing knowledge, then the question for this study becomes how Catholic authorities attempted to measure, interrogate and understand this experience. What intellectual tools and apparatus were used to construct the Church's image of sexuality, particularly female sexuality, and what can these tools tell us about both Catholic and wider secular notions of the personal at this historical moment? This chapter addresses these questions through an analysis of the workings of the Papal Commission for Birth Control. The story of the Commission has hitherto received little to no historical attention, no doubt a consequence of the Pope's eventual rebuttal of its suggestion for a change in doctrine. Of the 64 Commission members, 60 agreed that artificial means of contraception should no longer be prohibited by Catholic teaching and signed a final report saying so. The dearth of source material on the Commission also accounts for its historical neglect. Due to the secrecy of the Commission's workings, the only sources available to historians have been the official reports produced by the Commission's Secretariat Fr. de Reidmatten and leaks to the press. The unpublished papers of Commission member John Marshall allow us access to these covert debates and discussions. Despite Pope Paul VI's public and now infamous rejection of the Commission's final report in Humanae Vitae, the Encyclical was predicated on a number of significant aspects of the Commission's understanding of marital sexuality. As Tom Burns, the contemporary editor of the Catholic newspaper The Tablet, pointed out, the workings of the Commission offer an unparalleled insight in to 'the mind of the Church in the process of change'.³ They also reveal the oversights and assumptions that left this process ultimately unrealised.

The interviewees repeatedly identified Humanae Vitae as the principal example of the Church's inability to grasp the experiential realities of marital sexuality. SORCHA explained that 'it just showed the world how the Church did not know what it was dealing with. It was a symbol of how out of touch they were'.⁴ While the interviewees' immediate responses to the publication of Humanae Vitae are addressed more fully in the fourth chapter on early marriage, this chapter focuses on how this 'symbol' of the Church's detachment from the laity came about. It explores the way female sexuality was assessed within the Commission and the bearing this had on the Pope's pronouncement. Two related arguments are advanced; first, that the Commission did indeed neglect certain aspects of women's sexual experience. However, contrary to popular belief, this was not simply the failing of 'conservative' opponents of change, but was also

³ Cited in Kaiser, The Encyclical That Never Was, p.29.

⁴ SORCHA, interviewed 09/01/2014.

written into the way ‘liberal’ Commission members approached female sexuality.⁵ Sex was treated as a biological, instinctive entity that could be measured exclusively through empirical, quantitative methods. It was analysed within an immanent framework that was juxtaposed to the transcendent realm of theological thought. Indeed, this conceptual divide appeared in a transposed form in the rationale behind Humanae Vitae.

Secondly, the chapter demonstrates that this way of thinking was not limited to Catholic authorities, but reflected broader intellectual definitions of personal sexuality and religiosity in the 1960s. In this sense, the papers of the Commission destabilise the rigid ‘internal’ and ‘external’ categories that Brown and McLeod deliberate over while debating the causes of a ‘religious crisis’. The understanding of female sexuality that the Church employed was not simply an exception to its historical setting, but a composite part of a ‘revolutionary’ climate. A defining and previously unappreciated feature of this climate was the separation of the religious and the sexual along immanent and transcendent lines.

Investigating Catholic women’s sexual experience

Throughout the history of the Catholic Church, the meaning and function of sex had been considered to be trans-historical, prescribed by the strictures of Natural Law. That the Church’s definition of sexuality could be shaped by human intervention represented a significant shift in itself. Critically, it was recognised within the Commission that the meaning of sexuality was determined by cultural change rather than being a condition of nature –

‘Sexuality cannot be understood as an isolated function or separate problem ... It has a dynamic evolution, in other words a history’.⁶

English theologian Rev. Charles Davis presented a paper to the Commission that argued that Natural Law was to be interpreted by man through his rationality rather than being a known entity. Davis advanced the idea that the meaning of the natural evolves, and in this sense drew from the same constructionist impetuses that were directing intellectual thinking in linguistics and the social sciences at the time.⁷ The very first point in the conclusion of Fr. de Reidmatten’s final report stated:

⁵ The idea that ‘conservative’ members of the Commission neglected aspects of women’s sexual experience was a recurrent feature of the British media’s interpretations of the Commission’s workings and Humanae Vitae. See G. Armstrong, ‘Papal dilemma on the pill’, The Guardian, 11 Apr 1968, p. 11, and ‘Pope Paul on Contraception’, The Guardian, 30 July 1968.

⁶ ‘Medical Section Thursday 25th March 1965’, John Marshall Papers, (University of Notre Dame Archives, Illinois), CBCC 1/06, p.1.

⁷ C. Davis, ‘The Morality of Contraception’, John Marshall Papers, (UNDA), CBCC 2/02 T-28 p.2.

‘Nature is not something ready-made, it is ‘making itself’. Nature is constantly revealing herself in such a way that the mind never has to adapt itself to a ready-made nature, but to see it as something constantly on the move. Essence and historicity condition each other.’⁸

The Commission recognised sexuality to be a protean term that could be shaped by the changing currents of history -a noteworthy accession to the post-modern milieu of the contemporary intellectual community. Brown attributes the breakdown of Christianity’s ‘discursive power’ to the maturing of a ‘post-modernity’; an intellectual epoch defined by the deconstruction of language, signification and discourse.⁹ We can see that the Church was hardly impervious to this development. Hera Cook argues that feminist writers in the 1960s were primarily responding to Masters and Johnson’s de-contextualised understanding of sexuality that treated the human body as a fixed entity with its own empirical laws and processes.¹⁰ In rejecting this form of essentialism, the Catholic Church moved in lockstep with the secular expositors of a ‘sexual revolution’ and paved the way for a potential change in its understanding of married love.

The British media interpreted the prohibitions of Humanae Vitae as being a consequence of the Church’s long held disregard for, perhaps even opposition to, the healthy expression of female sexual pleasure. The Economist captured the prevailing opinion of the Church when it described the ‘male body of the Curia’ as being ‘sorely out of touch with Catholic womanhood’.¹¹ The source of this reputation was addressed directly by a female medical representative in the Commission –

‘until recently ‘nice’ people believed women not to have a spontaneous sexual arousal ... it is separate from falling in love, but is a physiological state of arousal which arises spontaneously and has no relation to any specific man’.¹²

The Commission discussed female sexuality as something that did not simply represent a composite part of marital relations, but as an important consideration in itself. Women’s sexual desire was understood as a psychological reflex, a spontaneous and essentially physical response that was distinguishable from the emotion of love. Consequently, the Commission involved single women in its considerations, as well as commenting on previously uncharted

⁸ De Reidmatten, ‘Report on the 4th Session’, p.45.

⁹ Brown, The Death of Christian, p.244.

¹⁰ Cook, The Long Sexual Revolution, p 255.

¹¹ Pyle, Pope and Pill, p.133.

¹² ‘Medical section Saturday 28th March’, John Marshall Papers, (UNDA), N CBCC 1/06, p.2

topics such as female masturbation.¹³ Hornsby-Smith described Catholic institutions as ‘lagging behind the rest of society’ in their stances towards women’s changing sexual status in the 1960s.¹⁴ It seems this disjuncture was acknowledged at the time by Catholic representatives and provided a salient imperative for the Commission’s workings.

Female sexuality was measured in a way that was in keeping with the new disciplines that had come to define ‘the sexual’ in the twentieth century, not only adhering to a psychological model of sexual health, but examining sexual behaviour through the methods and techniques of the social sciences. Hugh McLeod maintains that ‘scientific’ attacks on the Catholic Church were more likely to be inspired by the social sciences than the natural sciences in the 1960s.¹⁵ Cardinal Heenan’s expression of disapproval at the growing number of sociology students and their ‘inevitable demands for fresh surveys’ in 1967 seems to substantiate this portrayal of Christian versus sociological conflict.¹⁶ Sections of the Catholic community still balked at the very idea of sex being studied for intellectual purposes. Hera Cook draws attention to the Catholic academic Leslie Paul who had this to say in 1969 about the growing spate of scientific sex surveys –

‘The goal may be the lofty one of human knowledge but there does remain the question of the entitlement of any one individual to so deep an invasion of the privacy of another as the Kinsey—or the Masters and Johnson investigation demanded. [The latter had] an insolence of which only the most humble scientists are truly capable . . . as though their own motives could never be suspect even to themselves. . . and the value . . . of their knowledge is beyond question.’¹⁷

A mistrust of academic interest in sex had defined Catholic thinking for centuries and remained a presence within certain conservative parties throughout the decade. The decision to expand the Papal Commission represented a direct break with such a tradition for the central hierarchy. The techniques and apparatus of sociological methodology were heavily integrated into its discussion of female sexuality. The research that was undertaken for the Commission even made notable contributions to secular socio-scientific scholarship. Professor Marshall’s survey into the responses of Catholic couples to Natural Family Planning (NFP) attempted to provide an empirical analysis of the psychological and libidinal implications of the method on the

¹³ Prof. Lopez-Ibor introduced the topic of masturbation to the Commission, explaining that ‘Not only the difficulties of the married couples should be discussed, but also problems of the individual e.g masturbation’ in ‘Medical section’, John Marshall Papers, (UNDA) N CBCC 1/06, p.4.

¹⁴ M. Hornsby-Smith, Catholics in England 1950-2000: Historical and Sociological Perspectives, (London, 1999) p.12.

¹⁵ McLeod, The Religious Crisis, p.166.

¹⁶ Quoted in Hornsby-Smith, Catholics in England, p.7.

¹⁷ Quoted in Cook, Long Sexual Revolution, p.253.

husband and the wife separately, an undertaking that had no precedent in sociological research at the time:

‘Some of the trials of oral contraceptives have included questions about the “libido” defined as sexual desire ... but studies in depth of the psychological effects upon individuals and their relationship with their spouses do not appear to have been made’.¹⁸

In this sense, Catholic initiatives were not only harnessing the methodological techniques of the social sciences, but introducing a different set of ‘interpersonal concerns’ to anthropological analysis in the 1960s. At a moment when socio-scientific research and Catholic thought appeared to be heading in different directions, the papers of the Commission indicate that a dialogue between the two also existed.

Contrary to popular perception, the debate within the Commission over the suitability of NFP centred on the question of women’s sexual fulfilment. The way this fulfilment was measured tells us much about the way human sexuality was understood by both Catholic and socio-scientific authorities during the 1960s. The method had been criticised for being incompatible with natural sexual desires and therefore at odds with a healthy marital union.¹⁹ It required the wife to take her own temperature and then refer to a graph so as to calculate her period of fertility. The couple was then expected to abstain from sex during these fertile periods if they wished to avoid conception. Professor John Cavanagh presented a paper to the Commission that argued NFP was psychologically damaging to women in particular as it denied them copulation at their most fertile. He cited an extensive anthropological study of individual responses to different birth control methods in support of his contention.²⁰ British neurologist Professor John Marshall rebutted this critique of the method, deploying his own statistical survey in riposte. Professor Marshall’s data indicated a broad consistency in the responses of husbands and wives to the method, with 74% and 75% respectively finding NFP ‘helped their marriage’. Where there were discrepancies, it was men who seemed to be struggling with the periods of abstinence to a greater extent than women. NFP was judged almost entirely on its capacity to facilitate women’s sexual pleasure, but this pleasure was measured through a set of prescribed questions devised by academic researchers. Responses often had to fit within a binary agree/disagree framework that provided limited scope for additional comments or deeper reflections on the affectionate aspects of married love. The accredited methods of the social

¹⁸ Marshall and Rowe, ‘Psychological aspects of the basal’ p.18.

¹⁹ For an overview of the criticisms of NFP that were produced in the 1960s see C. Curran, Critical Concerns in Moral Theology, (Notre Dame, 1984) pp.216-224.

²⁰ J. Cavanagh, ‘Psychological Response of Individuals to Specific Methods of Birth Control’, John Marshall Papers, (UNDA), CBCC 1/06, p.33.

sciences were harnessed by the Commission in its examination of women's sexual fulfilment - the rigidly empirical criteria that were employed were more a reflection of the prevailing sociological climate than a prudishness from the Church.

The Commission's adherence to the ideas and apparatus of contemporary secular intellectual disciplines had the effect of framing human sexuality as an intellectual 'problem' to be rationally solved. Pope Paul VI's private address to the expanded Commission repeatedly identified sex as a 'problem' for Catholicism, explaining that the Church was 'anxious to give a solution adapted to the great problems which men face'.²¹ Pope Paul optimistically asked the expanded Commission

'If certain very difficult problems have arisen, those very problems which we ask you to examine in complete objectivity and liberty of spirit - is there not the begging of solutions to the problems which today seem so difficult?'²²

This sentence alone included three 'problems' and two 'difficults' in its call for 'objectivity and liberty of spirit'. The Commission's unequivocal adherence to the idea of sexual education represented the only real point of convergence between the liberal and conservative factions within the group. The purpose of this educating initiative was detailed as 'confronting the challenge of modern sexuality'.²³ The words 'problem', 'difficulty' and 'challenge' are ubiquitous in the papers of the Commission.²⁴ Attempts by the Church to engage with sexuality as an emerging body of expert knowledge were continually articulated in a language that defined sex as an intellectual challenge, obstacle or even battle.²⁵

The Church's efforts to engage with psychoanalytical thought in the 1960s epitomised its shifting relationship with secular intellectual disciplines. The Catholic hierarchy was initially hostile to the publications of Sigmund Freud's theories and continued to warn against the dangers of psychoanalysis up until the mid-1950s. In 1952, Pope Pius XII vigorously cautioned against 'psychotherapeutic treatments that seek to unleash the sexual instinct for seemingly therapeutic reasons'.²⁶ In the same year, TIME magazine ran an article under the heading 'Is Freud Sinful?' which included a number of comments from Vatican officials, notably that of

²¹ Pope Paul VI, 'Address of the Holy Father' John Marshall Papers, (UNDA), CBCC 1/02 p.3

²² Ibid. pp.2-3.

²³ De Reidmatten, 'Report of the 4th Session of the Commission', John Marshall Papers, (UNDA), CBCC 1/05 p.10

²⁴ The controversy of population restriction became associated with the 'challenge' of sexual liberation in the British media as well; The Guardian quoted progressive cleric Cardinal Suenens of Mechlin-Brussels as saying 'this is all a major problem for the Church', the exact nature of this 'problem' being left ambiguous.

²⁵ The idea of the Church being in a 'battle' with medical science is reflected in the title of John Rock's book - J. Rock, The Time Has Come: A Catholic Doctor's Proposals to End the Battle over Birth Control, (New York, 1963).

²⁶ A. Elia, 'Vatican', entry in Encyclopedia of Psychology and Religion: LZ, (eds.) D. Leeming, K. Madden, S. Marlan, (USA, 2009) p.940.

Monsignor Pericle Felici, an official of the Sacred Congregation of the Sacrament, who attacked the ‘absurdity’ of psychoanalysis and claimed that ‘anyone who adopts the Freudian method is risking mortal sin’.²⁷ Nevertheless, the psychoanalytical language of the ‘self’ provided the principal resource for the Commission’s revised definition of human sexuality ten years later. The Commission was presented with a paper drawn up by British psychologist Professor D. Barrett at the request of Fr. de Reidmatten that outlined the Church’s new conception of the relationship between sexual identity and selfhood:

‘The acceptance of sexuality is the acceptance of reality. It is to accept oneself with one’s qualities and deficiencies. Love of self, of another and of God is one and the same thing. Refusal of self brings in its train perversion and ultimately destruction of the self and the other. This acceptance of sexuality which is acceptance of self requires unceasing effort.’²⁸

Catholic discourses mirrored the developments of the secular world in forging a connection between sexuality and the introspection of the self. For Prof. Barratt, it was only through alerting oneself to one’s instincts and desires that an individual could realise the true nature of sexuality. Human subjectivity was thereby understood to be the product of a hermeneutic process through which men and women were required to interpret a hidden and autonomous self. This definition of the human psyche was one that was in vogue within the contemporary scientific community, but posed a number of questions when considered in relation to a Catholic understanding of moral agency. Matthew Thomson points out that since the start of the century a collection of writers had grappled with the apparent tensions between a Christian notion of free will and psychology’s emphasis on the subconscious.²⁹ The Commission’s adherence to a psychoanalytical model of selfhood was the culmination of its ardent quest to reconcile Catholicism with an emergent body of sexual expertise.

The word ‘self’ peppered De Reidmatten’s final report to Pope Paul and was even present in Humanae Vitae – ‘Whoever truly loves his marriage partner loves not only for what he receives, but for the partner’s self’.³⁰ In both Humanae Vitae and the papers of the Commission, there was a sense of the Church attempting to confront the subject of the self, a self that was defined

²⁷ ‘Is Freud Sinful?’, Time Magazine, April 21 1952.

²⁸ D. Barrett, ‘Intervention in the sexual process according to the culture and mentality of different people’, John Marshall Papers, (UNDA), CBCC 1/06 p.6.

²⁹ M. Thomson, Psychological Subjects: Identity, Health and Culture in Twentieth Century Britain, (Oxford, 2006) p.179

³⁰ Pope Paul VI, Humanae Vitae – Encyclical Letter of His Holiness Pope Paul VI on the Regulation of Births, (London, 1968) p.13.

as being concealed, instinctive and sexual. Under the heading ‘Mastery of Self’ Humanae Vitae reads –

‘The honest practice of regulation of birth demands first of all that husband and wife ... tend towards securing perfect self-mastery’.³¹

The emphasis on mastering rather than accepting the self is an important distinction. Self-mastery was described in Humanae Vitae as ‘dominating instinct by means of one’s reason and free will’.³² The self that was constructed within the Commission was one that the Pope identified as an object to be governed and overcome rather than accepted. The psychoanalytical terms of reference that were used to articulate the Commission’s case for change were simultaneously harnessed and rejected in Humanae Vitae. Perhaps this should come as no surprise; in his opening address to the enlarged Commission Pope Paul explained that ‘the substance of the faith is one thing, the way in which it is presented is quite another.’³³ This thesis is not concerned with postulating over the basis of the Pope’s final decision. Countless other Catholic commentators have done so; the inevitably sparse source material surrounding the Pope’s mind-set make this largely a matter of conjecture, and with this something of a diversion.³⁴ However, the language of self-realisation that was deployed by the Commission does tell us something important about the historical setting the birth control debate existed within. The dominance of psycho-therapeutic models of normality and pathology shaped the discourses that were available to both liberal Catholic authorities and the Pope in the 1960s. The intellectual parameters of the birth control debate were circumscribed by a historically specific, liberationist model of the ‘personal’.

What was notable by its absence from the papers of the Commission was a qualitative account of Catholic women’s everyday experience of sex. As we have seen, the female libido was addressed directly within the Commission, but it was measured by quantitative survey data that was then interpreted by intellectual experts who were themselves often male. At no point were the women at the centre of this debate asked to talk about their own sexual experiences and contraceptive choices. In this way, a distance was maintained between the formulations of the Commission and the lived experience of Catholic individuals. The lack of female involvement was, in part, a straightforward consequence of the Church’s particular conception of

³¹ Pope Paul VI, Humanae Vitae, p.27.

³²Ibid.

³³Pope Paul VI, Address of the Holy Father to the Commission, March 26th 1965.

³⁴ For example sees R. Nowell, ‘Sex and Marriage’ in P. Harris (ed), On Human Life, (1968, London) p.71 and E. Stourton, Absolute Truth: The struggle for Meaning in Today’s Catholic Church, (London, 1999) p.50p. Stourton argues that Pope Paul did not believe himself to be endowed with the authority to enact a change in the Church’s teaching, despite sympathising with the Commission’s findings.

womanhood. As has been shown by Karen Trimble Alliaume among others, the Catholic Church has resisted changes in gender roles more than any other feature of modernity.³⁵ The fact that women's ordination did not really feature as a mainstream topic of discussion in the 1960s was an indication of the Church's entrenched attitude on the subject. Catholic women were expected to be sexually active, but continued to be prescribed a subordinate role in terms of authority. This extended beyond the intimate realms of conjugal rights and bodily autonomy, both of which have been discussed widely elsewhere, to the public sphere of theological debate.³⁶

Alongside the perennial question of gender, the lack of female testimony in the Commission's reckonings also reflected a particular understanding of sex that was specific to its historical setting. Writing in the middle of the 1970s, Foucault was to observe that sex had become defined by scientific values, constructed as a matter of truth which was removed from its human, corporeal sensitivities -

‘The essential point is that sex was not only a matter of sensation and pleasure, of law and taboo, but also of truth and falsehood, that the truth of sex became something fundamental, useful, or dangerous, precious or formidable: in short, that sex was constituted as a problem of truth.’³⁷

Catholic authorities repeatedly defined female sexuality as an intellectual problem to be rationally understood and scientifically remedied. Rather than being entirely anomalous, this understanding of sex tells us as much about the intellectual infrastructure of a ‘sexual revolution’ ethos as it does the Church's perceived relationship with such a phenomenon. Alana Harris has shown how the politics of the family and associated constructions of gender were becoming increasingly contested within the Catholic community in the years 1945-65.³⁸ As the idea of a ‘sexual revolution’ became an explicit and conspicuous presence by the end of this period, these contests began to centre on the question of what constituted a ‘healthy’, ‘liberated’ and above all ‘natural’ understanding of sex. Catholic authorities struggled to break away from a script that increasingly cast religious sensibilities as the antagonist.

Humanae Vitae and the conceptual separation between sex and religion

Humanae Vitae has often been interpreted as Pope Paul's personal take on the question of birth control, bearing little or no relation to the work of the Commission or the wider Catholic

³⁵ K. Trimble Alliaume, ‘Disturbingly Catholic: Thinking the Inordinate Body’ in S. St. Ville and E. Armour, eds., Bodily Citations: Religion and Judith Butler, (Columbia, 2006).

³⁶ G. Burns, The Frontiers of Catholicism: The politics of ideology in a Liberal World, (California, 1994).

³⁷ Foucault, History of Sexuality, p.56.

³⁸ A. Harris, Faith in the Family: A Lived Religious History of English Catholicism, 1945-1982, (Manchester, 2013).

community. Robert Nowell, for example, described the Encyclical as ‘no more than the private views of the Bishop of Rome’.³⁹ Despite its obvious rejection of the Commission’s suggestion for doctrinal change, there were in fact a number of underlying consistencies shared by the Encyclical and the workings of the Commission. The Commission’s construction of sexuality as an intellectual ‘problem’ was mirrored in the language of Humanae Vitae - ‘The problem of birth, like every other problem concerning human life, is to be considered beyond partial perspectives.’⁴⁰ The word ‘problem’ was an integral feature of the way Humanae Vitae’s argument was set up; its very first section was titled ‘New Aspects of the Problem’. The idea that questions of birth and sexual love represented a problem for the Church was one that had not existed in papal pronouncements before the post-war period.⁴¹ In defining sex as a problem, the Pope was encouraged to provide an absolute and emphatic ‘solution’. As certain commentators have pointed out, Humanae Vitae did include a noteworthy change in the Church’s marital theology. In what is otherwise a highly critical appraisal of Humanae Vitae, Lionel Keane wrote in 1968 –

‘To put marital union or conjugal love first as the Pope does is in fact to accept the new theology which evaluates the marital act in terms of human sexuality, and this is to depart from the constant teaching of the Church that the primary purpose of human intercourse is procreation.’⁴²

The concerns raised by Fr Haring in a marbled conference room had been justified; it was a change in fundamental theology that was being discussed. The circumscribed nature of this change, limited as it was to abstract, theological semantics, should not be dissociated from the intellectual processes through which it was achieved. Humanae Vitae was not simply the product of a predetermined ‘conservative’ victory over the ‘liberal’ case for change as is commonly thought; it reflected the ideas and assumptions that underscored both conservative and liberal understandings of sex, Catholic theology and the relationship between the two. Moreover, it reflected wider intellectual definitions of the sexual and the religious that had emerged in the post-war. As this section demonstrates, Humanae Vitae was part and product of a conceptual divide between sex and religion that extended well beyond the boundaries of the central Catholic Church.

³⁹ R. Nowell, ‘Sex and Marriage’ in P. Harris (ed), On Human Life, (1968, London) p.71.

⁴⁰ Pope Paul VI, Humanae Vitae, p.11.

⁴¹ Indeed, defining sex as a problem did not continue very far beyond this period either - the latest translation of Humanae Vitae published on the Vatican’s website has replaced the word ‘problems’ with the word ‘questions’. Pope Paul VI, Humanae Vitae; On the Regulation of Births, accessed from http://w2.vatican.va/content/paul-vi/en/encyclicals/documents/hf_p-vi_enc_25071968_humanae-vitae.html.

⁴² L Keane, ‘Natural Law and Birth Control’, in P. Harris (ed), On Human Life, (London, 1968) p.37.

A number of commentators have pointed out that there was not one but two Catholic birth control debates running concurrently in the late 1960s – one over the question of papal authority in doctrinal reform and a second about the intrinsic morality of artificial means of contraception.⁴³ The papers of what has come to be known as a second, ‘minority report’ have recently been released to the public and appear to confirm this notion of two separate strands of argumentation.⁴⁴ Just half an hour after the Commission’s secretariat Fr. De Riedmatten had delivered the ‘majority report’ to the Pope, Cardinal Alfredo Ottaviani, a powerful conservative cleric and the then head of the Congregation for the Doctrine of Faith, asked two similarly minded Commission members to stay in Rome an extra week and draft a counter report.⁴⁵ This ‘minority report’ was almost solely based on the question of authority – it argued the Church could not go back on its existing teaching as this would corrupt the ‘value and dignity of the Church’s teaching authority’ -

‘The Church cannot change her answer because this answer is true...It is true because the Catholic Church, instituted by Christ to show men a secure way to eternal life, could not have so wrongly erred during all those centuries of its history.... If the Church could err in such a way, the authority of the ordinary magisterium in moral matters would be thrown into question. The faithful could not put their trust in the magisterium’s presentation of moral teaching, especially in sexual matters.’⁴⁶

The authors of the minority report, a moral philosopher called Dr. Germaine Grisez and a clergyman Fr. John Ford, attempted to trump the question of contraceptive morality by appealing to a higher, transcendent set of epistemological questions about doctrinal authority. The phrase ‘especially in sexual matters’ is of particular significance – the Second Vatican Council had already enacted a number of liturgical, constitutive and doctrinal reforms in areas such as the language of the mass, the teachings on eating meat on Fridays and inter-denominational dialogue. The establishment of the Commission in the first place, removed as it was from the public forum of the Council, was based on the belief that sex and matters of the body were somehow special and needed to be separated out from other aspects of theology. The question of authority only seemed to take on its heightened, numinous significance when dealing with matters of sex.

⁴³ Leo Pyle, *The Pope and the Pill*, pp.1-4.

⁴⁴ J. Ford and G. Grisez, *Minority Papal Commission Report*, accessed from <http://www.twotlj.org/BCCCommission.html>

⁴⁵ C. Norris, ‘The Papal Commission on Birth Control—revisited’, *The Linacre Quarterly*, 80, (2013), p. 8–16.

⁴⁶ Ford and Grisez, *Minority Papal Commission Report*.

If there were then two points of debate – one about the theological right of a Pope to change doctrine and a second about sexual morality, let us look a little deeper into how these two debates were framed and what the divide between the two signified. The question of authority was discussed within an abstract, transcendental framework – the last line of the minority report reads -

‘For the Church to have erred so gravely in its grave responsibility of leading souls would be tantamount to seriously suggesting that the assistance of the Holy Spirit was lacking to her’⁴⁷

In drawing on the image of the Holy Spirit, the architects of the minority report encapsulated the unearthly, celestial language through which the debate about religious authority was articulated. The co-author of the Minority report Fr. Ford chose to write key aspects of his case in Latin, as opposed to the vernacular French used by De Reidmatten in the majority report. The tone, language and rationale of the minority report were all calculated to transcend the profanity of the liberal case for change. The ontological divide that was constructed within the minority report, between matters of earthly immanence and celestial transcendence, was replicated in Humanae Vitae -

‘The question of human procreation, like every other question which touches human life, involves more than the limited aspects specific to such disciplines as biology, psychology, demography or sociology. It is the whole man and the whole mission to which he is called that must be considered: both its natural, earthly aspects and its supernatural, eternal aspects.’⁴⁸

While the Pope stressed his intention to provide a holistic view of man’s ‘whole mission’, he simultaneously set up an explicit divide between ‘natural, earthly aspects’, and ‘supernatural, eternal aspects’ of the ‘grave questions’ at hand.⁴⁹ This conceptual separation was at the heart of Humanae Vitae’s internal logic. It provided the grounds for the eventual prioritisation of the question of ‘theological authority’ over and above that of ‘intrinsic sexual morality’. Aside from the gendered language through which the Encyclical was articulated (a feature of Papal communications throughout the twentieth century), it was the binary ontology within which ‘the question of human procreation’ was embedded that made Humanae Vitae distinctly of its time.

⁴⁷ Ford and Grisez, Minority Papal Commission Report.

⁴⁸ Pope Paul VI, Humanae Vitae: On the Regulation of Births, accessed from http://w2.vatican.va/content/paul-vi/en/encyclicals/documents/hf_p-vi_enc_25071968_humanae-vitae.html.

⁴⁹ Ibid.

Conversely, we have seen how the debate about sexual morality worked within an immanent, material framework. The Commission members treated sex as a biological phenomenon that could be measured and understood through empirical, scientific investigation. In this way, its members co-opted the Freudian behaviourist understanding of sexuality that was ascendant in the social and natural sciences at the time. As Michael Kimmel has argued, it was not until the start of the 1970s that intellectual approaches to sex underwent a paradigmatic shift, as social constructionists such as John Gagnon and William Simon began to show that sex was not simply driven by biological urges but shaped by a complex set of social and cultural meanings.⁵⁰ In failing to speak to Catholic women to garner a qualitative insight into their emotional and sensual subjectivities, the ‘liberal’ case for change neglected vital aspects of personal sexual experience. Catholic authorities positioned the sexual and the religious in two diametrically opposing categories – the religious as unembodied transcendence and the sexual as fleshly immanence. In this sense, *Humanae Vitae*, the workings of the Commission and the duality of the wider Catholic birth control debate were all expressions of a much deeper ontological chasm that had opened up in the decades after the war.

Conclusion

Callum Brown maintains that in the midst of a religious crisis in the 1960s, the Christian Churches were in a ‘constant state of panic over sex’.⁵¹ The term ‘panic’ does not suitably describe the Catholic Church’s approach to marital sexuality. Panic suggests a rushed and ill-conceived quality; we have seen that Catholic authorities constructed their sexual knowledge through a process of meticulous discussion that incorporated the views of both lay and clerical representatives. Panic also suggests a fear or distrust; we have seen that Church representatives engaged with sexual topics in a frank manner that drew on the ‘modern’ disciples that had come to redefine marital sexuality. Brown’s depiction of the Church is not substantiated with much supporting evidence and this is understandable considering his enthusiasm for the ‘external’ causes of the religious crisis. However, his dispute with McLeod over the internal or external causes of the religious crisis does perpetuate the misconception that the Church was unilaterally at odds with contemporaneous medico-scientific understandings of sex.

The material evidenced here has suggested that something of a dialogue existed between Catholic and secular discourses, showing them to be a part and product of the same historical processes. Harry Cocks has called for the history of modernity as a simple story of secularisation to be reshaped in light of such examples, with his own work showing how early

⁵⁰ M. Kimmel, ‘John Gagnon and the Sexual Self’ in M. Kimmel, (ed.) *The Sexual Self: the Construction of Sexual Scripts* (USA, 2007) p.vii.

⁵¹ This comment first appeared in a lecture by Brown, C. Brown, Lecture at the Anglo-American Historical Conference, London, 6 July 2006.

scientific efforts to understand the psychology of sex were informed by religious impetuses.⁵² By the 1960s, this dialogue often saw the Church positioned as the counterpoint to secular sexual expertise, but there were also points of reciprocation between the two.⁵³ Just as the marriage guidance initiative had been driven by Protestant actors in the first half of the twentieth century, Catholic forays into socio-scientific research were making significant contributions to the field in their recognition of ‘interpersonal concerns’.⁵⁴

The Pope’s decision, as well as the Commission’s case for change, should not be simply understood as exceptions to the historical setting they existed within. They were instead reciprocal and yet composite facets of a ‘liberationist’ culture. Ostensibly, this culture was defined by an overturn of established authorities and orthodoxies; changes in both sex and Catholicism were presented as emancipatory movements away from authoritarian coercion towards individual autonomy. The traditional historiography of the ‘sixties’, epitomised by the work of Arthur Marwick and Christie Davies, would later reinforce this story of shifting power dynamics.⁵⁵ Indeed, Marwick was to identify the Catholic Church as the archetypal antagonist in his account of sixties liberation, describing it as being ‘in opposition to all the great movements aiming towards greater freedom for ordinary human beings in the 1960s’.⁵⁶ Digging beneath this narrative, we can see that a liberationist culture was underpinned by an ontological break in the way sex and religion were conceptualised. In the climate of ‘sixties’ permissiveness, Catholic authorities considered the liberation of sexuality to be a distinctly secular phenomenon, ushered in by the technological advances of medical science, articulated through a psycho-therapeutic language of self-realisation and verified by socio-scientific criteria. Paradoxically, the efforts that avowedly progressive Church representatives took to reconcile Catholic thought with a modern body of sexual knowledge were underpinned by an assumption about the foreign and strangely irreligious nature of the topic they were addressing.

This chapter has demonstrated how Catholic authorities’ attempts to investigate sexual experience in the 1960s were impaired by the conception of the ‘personal’ they employed. This conception was specific to the historical moment the Commission members were working within. The following chapters advance an alternative model of the personal in their exploration of Catholic women’s marital sexuality. This model is equally an expression of the environment it has been constructed within, as academics increasingly look to resources that ‘undermine the

⁵² H. Cocks, ‘Religion and Spirituality’ in M. Houlbrook and H. G Cocks (eds.), Palgrave Advances in the Modern History of Sexuality, (London, 2006) p.157.

⁵³ Brown, Religion and Society, p.234.

⁵⁴ Marshall J., and Rowe, B., ‘Psychological aspects of the basal body temperature method of regulating births’ Fertility and Sterility, 21, (1970) pp.15-22. These findings were published in a leading, secular medical journal.

⁵⁵ A. Marwick, The Sixties: Cultural Revolution in Britain, France, Italy and the United States 1958-1974, (Oxford, 1999), C. Davies, Permissive Britain, Social Change in the Sixties and Seventies, (London, 1975).

⁵⁶ Marwick, The Sixties, p.36.

traditional division between objective study and personal experience'.⁵⁷ Recognising the contingent nature of the personal is itself the first step in moving beyond the sterile dichotomies of the Catholic birth control debate.

⁵⁷ L. Robinson, Gay Men and the Revolutionary Left Since 1957, PhD thesis (University of Sussex) p.7, published as Gay Men and the Left in Postwar Britain: How the Personal Got Political (Manchester, 2007).

Chapter 3

Sexuality in later marriage

‘Later marriage’ was a life cycle stage peculiar to both Catholic women and a particular historical moment. Michael Anderson has argued that a historically specific, ‘modern life cycle’ emerged in the decades after the Second World War. His analysis of demographic statistics suggested that by the 1960s and 1970s, British women were ending their period of child rearing at a considerably earlier stage than ever before. In the mid-nineteenth century the median age of women at the birth of their last child was about 39 and many went on having children into their early 40s. Even in the 1930s, women reaching the end of their childbearing were doing so on average at the age of around 32. Those marrying after World War Two, however, aided by a fall in the age of marriage, completed their childbearing significantly earlier; on average by about age 28. This left them with another expected 52 years of life. Anderson linked this to trend to the rise in women’s economic status, as married women were afforded new opportunities to take up paid labour after full-time motherhood had ended. It was also a trend which represented an extension of time and space for ‘personal’ considerations as opposed to familial duties. As the chapter demonstrates, this distinctly modern life-cycle stage was of particular significance for the sexual and religious development of married Catholic women in post-war England.

Later marriage broadly denotes the years of sexual activity that came after the daily demands of childrearing had diminished.¹ The parameters of this life-cycle stage varied from person to person, but in general seem to have run from the interviewees’ mid-thirties to sixties for those married in the immediate post-war years, beginning a little later for those married after the 1960s. As Lyn Bothelo has pointed out, historical accounts of women and ageing tend to focus on the menopause.² However, the menopause did not represent a major topic of discussion in the interviews. This absence may have been a consequence of my own line of questioning and the social stigma that surrounds the subject, but, as this chapter suggests, it also reflected the way the interviewees chose to make sense of their lives. Rather than appealing to constructions of biology or fertility to delineate this life-cycle stage, later marriage is treated here as a category of the everyday – defined by familial routines, religious beliefs and, above all else, sexual experiences.

¹ Childrearing itself was an activity which changed over time. For more discussion of this see S. Humphries and P. Gordon, *Labour of Love: experience of parenthood in Britain, 1900-1950*, (London, 1993).

² L. Botelho, ‘Old Age and Menopause in rural women of early modern Suffolk’, in Thane and Botelho (eds.), *Women and Ageing in British Society Since 1500* (Oxford, 2001) pp. 43-66.

The divide between early and later marriage may be artificial, but it was one that came out of the interviews -

‘Things didn’t start coming together for me until my later marriage, my mid-forties. It was crucial that things changed at that stage because I was at breaking point. And they did.’³

Although not always expressly using the terms ‘early’ and ‘later’ marriage as Doreen did, almost all the ‘liberal’ interviewees identified a clear break in their sexual development. This break was often but not always aligned with a change in contraceptive practice – most interviewees tied it in with the uptake of artificial means of contraception and the resulting removal of a fear of pregnancy. A handful remembered this break as being less linked to contraceptive behaviour and more a ‘natural progression’ that came through the passing of time. In both cases, what was emphasised was a ‘liberation’ from the confines of doctrinal obedience and a resulting resolution of the conflicts that had dogged their early married lives. This chapter interrogates what ‘liberation’ really meant for Catholic individuals, teasing out the complexities and contingencies that lay beneath this distinctly late-modern discourse.

Early marriage was often remembered as a period of activity and busyness, with little time to reflect on either religious or sexual matters. As we shall see in the next chapter, it was often typified by tensions between sexual fulfilment and religious imperatives which in many cases, led to great emotional, spiritual and physical frustration. Many of the interviewees stressed that it was not until the everyday duties of child rearing had eased off that transformatory personal changes occurred. ‘Later marriage’ therefore represented the pivotal life cycle stage in the religious and sexual narratives that were recounted. It is possible that this reading of marital development may have been encouraged by the interviewees’ proximity to later marriage – the mental intricacies and nuances of early married life are likely to have been less clear than those that were experienced more recently. Again though, I am reluctant to simply attribute such a trend to the frailties of human memory. Instead, I focus on the selections that are present in remembering and unremembering, interpreting these choices as important indicators of Catholic women’s marital experience.

The differing ways later marriage was remembered marked the key division between the ‘liberal’ and ‘orthodox’ interviewees. It was often at this stage that a ‘liberal’ Catholic identity was adopted whereas ‘orthodox’ interviewees tended to emphasise the continuities that ran throughout their married life. The discrepancies between the two groups have naturally received much attention, but I want to reflect on some of the commonalities that underpinned the way sex

³ Doreen, interviewed 11/08/2012.

and religion were thought of by representatives of both. If we deconstruct the concept of Catholic 'sexual liberation', looking beyond the straightforward story of shifting power-dynamics through which it is ordinarily understood, we find a process of active categorisation at its core. 'Liberals' spoke of finally being able to separate their religious beliefs from their sexual morality in their later marriage, a distinction which was identified as the sole reason for the survival of their faith. Orthodox women, whilst taking an opposing view of 'categorisation', equally harnessed this discourse and saw it as an essential facet of 'liberal' Catholicism. Scratching below the surface of a liberation narrative, the concept of categorisation helps us rethink the way we understand the relationship between religious and sexual change in the post-war. It begs the questions of what and who these categories were defined by, questions that this chapter moves towards answering.

The chapter begins by unpacking the interviewees' liberation stories at a discursive level, assessing the language and ideas that were used to construct this narrative. This is not done to construct what Penny Summerfield would label a 'false dichotomy' between discourse and experience, but to start from the moment of recollection which is inescapably linguistic, and then move to consider which elements of experience these memories can elucidate.⁴ The overriding story of the interviews was one of sex replacing religion as the primary constituent of personal subjectivity, a narrative which fits neatly with Brown and Taylor's models of post war 'cultural revolution'.⁵ The interviewees harnessed psychotherapeutic and popular 'liberationist' discourses to describe the 'discovery', 'realisation' or 'emancipation' of their sexual selves. The character of the 'self' was almost always constructed as an essentially sexual entity, an autonomous, instinctive operator for whom religious beliefs needed to fall in to line. Crucially though, Catholic women remembered this reconceptualisation of individual identity as occurring in later marriage, rather than a youthful, 'coming of age'. It was a change that came out of gradual, often arduous physical experience rather than the liberating forces of a permissive ideology. Correspondingly, the change was often located in the 1970s and 1980s rather than the 1960s.

The second section of the chapter reconstructs the moments within which these changes in personal identity occurred. The interviewees' testimony placed a particular emphasis on the experiential when recalling changes in contraceptive practice and sexual behaviour. They were often eager to downplay the role of the new ideologies and texts they came across in the sixties, and stressed instead the operation of embodied physical and emotional sensibilities. These sensibilities were themselves inexorably linked to the material environment within which they

⁴ P. Summerfield, Reconstructing Women's Wartime Lives: Discourse and Subjectivity in Oral Histories of the Second World War, (Manchester, 1998) pp. 9-16.

⁵ Brown discusses the similarities and divergences (which Brown interprets as merely a matter of semantics) between Taylor's and his own model of 'cultural revolution' – Brown, Death of Christian, p. 194.

existed – night-times, the bedroom, even the bed itself. The physical spaces that housed changes in contraceptive morality warrant as much historical attention as abstract, theological philosophies. Drawing on ‘spatial’ and ‘materialist’ methods recently developed in the histories of sexuality and religion respectively, we can see that these environments themselves have a history in the twentieth century. Recognising this contingency allows for a fuller picture of how Catholic beliefs on contraception were made up of an interaction between the theological and the material.

At the heart of Catholic women’s disaffection with the clergy was the perception that priests could not understand or relate to the physical, embodied dimensions of marital sexuality. For many of the interviewees, this misgiving only fully formed in later marriage. As the final section demonstrates, the question of sexual experience was critical to the declining authority of the Catholic clergy in the post-war decades. The chapter therefore encourages us to rethink the way changing power dynamics within Catholicism are understood, emphasising the role of personal, embodied experiences rather than inanimate discursive ideologies in driving this process.

Stories of the self – narrating a Catholic liberation

The belief that the last fifty years have witnessed nothing short of a revolution in sexual behaviour and attitudes has become enshrined in popular and academic interpretations of post-1960s change. ‘Sexual liberation’ has developed into an axiomatic presence in the postulations of various historical, sociological and philosophical authorities, but is also a widely favoured rhetoric for ‘ordinary’ men and women. It is a story which the symbolic interactionist Ken Plummer treats as just that; a story, the story, in fact, of the late-modern individual. Plummer argues that within a web of competing and interacting narratives, ‘libertarianism’ has emerged as the dominant tale of our times – ‘sex is now viewed as a joyous phenomenon, connected to personal health, happiness and self-fulfillment and social progress, [we have moved] towards a feminisation of sex, ultimately towards a democratisation of intimacy.’⁶ Callum Brown would agree with Plummer when he says that this narrative was produced in the transformatory social and cultural setting of the 1960s, but would contend that it was inescapably bound up with the rejection of religious commitment – it is a life story reserved for secularising, ‘modern’ individuals.

⁶ Plummer, Telling Sexual Stories, (London, 1995) p. 123.

The interviewees' testimonies represented a clear and often expressed refutation of Brown's indictment.⁷ At the heart of all but five interviews was a story of emancipatory personal change. The 'liberal' interviewees readily constructed their own Catholic liberation narratives, describing a change from authoritarianism to conscience, from sensual repression to expression. Indeed, the zeal with which the interviewees pursued this optimistic life story offers an indication of how pervasive an exclusively secular reading of it has become. Phrases like 'I bet you didn't expect me to say that' and 'you may be shocked to know that I...' were common – the interviewees candour was a conscious challenge to dominant readings of Catholic woman's sexual oppression.⁸

Questions about the use, production and validity of a 'liberation narrative' have abounded. Marxist and 'post-Marxist' scholars alike have sought to denude it of its Whiggish implications and show it to be an illusionary fiction – post-structuralists have asked whether 'liberation' can ever have a unified meaning while Foucauldian scholars have argued that this emancipation has created new and more insidious forms of regulation and control.⁹ I am not interested in assessing the veracity of this story, but intend to treat it as a historical artefact in itself. This section focuses on the language that the interviewees drew on when composing these narratives, unpacking and situating the assumptions about human sexuality and religious authority that underpinned their recollections within a wider historical context. Amidst the array of questions that have been levelled at a liberation narrative, I address a simple and yet underexplored question here – what exactly was it that was liberated? This line of enquiry allows us to get at the changing relationship between sex and identity for Catholic women in the post-war years.

When describing the changes in both religious and sexual development that occurred in later marriage, many of the interviewees started using a particular word for the first time in the interview; 'self'. It should be stressed that I did not use this word in my questions or project description – it was a discourse that the interviewees selected of their own volition. The term 'self' has become a staple feature of socio-scientific, historical and wider intellectual vocabularies in the last sixty years. Grace Janzen calls it the 'thinly veiled usurper of the 'soul''. In this way, the 'self' has often been considered a symbol of secularism's triumph over religion.¹⁰ For scholars such as Nicolas Rose, the discourse of the self was symptomatic of an emergent psychotherapeutic culture which replaced Christianity as the dominant moral resource

⁷ Although none of the interviewees had read Brown's work prior to the interview, I ended each interview by mapping out his model of historical change and asking for the interviewees' opinion of it.

⁸ For example Sorcha, interviewed 09/01/2014, Georgina, interviewed 22/11/2012

⁹ A number of critiques of 'sexual liberation' emerged in the late 1980s and early 1990s from various intellectual standpoints. For examples and surveys of these critiques, see S. Seidman, *Embattled Eros: Sexual Politics and Ethics in Contemporary America*, (London, 1992), J. D'Emilio and E. Freedman, *Intimate Matters*, (New York, 1988), A. Giddens, *The Transformation of Intimacy*, (Oxford, 1992), N. Rose, *Inventing Our Selves: Psychology, Power and Personhood*, (Cambridge, 1996).

¹⁰ Janzen, *Becoming Divine*, p.89.

for individuals in the first half of twentieth century.¹¹ As Michael Kimmel notes however, it was not until the late 1960s that this discourse began to infiltrate popular consciousness and with this, take on a revised meaning.¹² The sociologists Walter Gagnon and John Simon published their seminal work Sexual Conduct in 1970, which, similarly to Freud fifty years earlier, observed that sex had become a central building block in people's identities.¹³ But Gagnon and Simon were to turn Freud on his head, arguing that it was less biological urges that drove sexual experience and more a complex set of cultural scripts which gave meaning to these urges.¹⁴ The constructionism that underpinned their research, as well as the umbrage taken with Freudian behaviourism, was indicative of the wider social climate they were working within. It is between these two readings of a 'sexual self', a term used by both Freud and Gagnon & Simon, that we find the best description of the form of subjectivity that the interviewees constructed. They represented a generation who were conscious that their identity was a 'storied' construction that had been shaped by a mass-mediated, post-1960s sexual culture. The 'story' that Catholic women subscribed to above and beyond any other was one of sexuality being an essential, biological force that drove their identity and consciousness, with religion being defined as a 'side', 'aspect' or 'object' of this autonomous operator.

The emergence of a Catholic sexual self

A liberation narrative was not unanimously subscribed to by the interviewees, with the five 'orthodox' Catholics all expressly resisting it to varying degrees. Elizabeth had this to say -

'I have always felt 'female emancipation' was a misplaced concept. I have always felt free – trained and practised as an Architect without any barriers, chose my boyfriends, husband, lived independently from age eighteen, treasured my virginity until marriage, never used contraception.'¹⁵

Elizabeth's sense of individual autonomy may have been indicative of a specifically middle class Catholic experience. Nevertheless, the 'orthodox' interviewees were all eager to stress how their sexual behaviour had not been produced by blind, doctrinal obedience but represented a set of choices that they were free to make. Many displayed a real sense of anger at the paternalistic suppositions that were bound up with a discourse of necessary 'liberation'.

¹¹ N. Rose, Governing the Soul: The Shaping of the Private Self, (New York, 1989).

¹² M. Kimmel, 'John Gagnon and the Sexual Self' in M. Kimmel, (ed.) The Sexual Self: the Construction of Sexual Scripts(USA, 2007) p.vii.

¹³ W.Gagnon and J. Simon, Sexual Conduct, (USA, 1973).

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ Elizabeth, interviewed 08/02/2014.

Questioning the virtues of 'liberal' Catholicism was not limited to the orthodox interviewees. Rosie proudly identified as a 'liberal' Catholic at the start of the interview. She described the pre-conciliar years as 'dark ages' where Catholics blindly followed laws and rules with no sense of 'ownership' over their faith. However, the process of remembering seemed to undermine the optimism with which she spoke of the changes that had occurred in her belief system. There was a clear sense of nostalgia to her recollections when she explained that -

'All the things we were taught were absolutely logical; if this was so then this must be so, and it was all fitting together like a wonderful jigsaw, and in my teens I thought that was wonderful, you know. We Catholics have the answer for everything. But, when you get into adulthood and real life you find that it isn't as simple as all that, it's impossible really. Vatican II coincided with the sexual revolution; it sort of took the cork out of the bottle and you're never going to be able to put it back'¹⁶

As the interview drew to a close, Rosie reflected on her liberal form of religiosity -

'I suppose I have become a sort of pick and mix Catholic, I don't feel guilty anymore if I miss mass on Sunday, I don't agree with a lot of the things the Church says, I think there should be women priests, I think there should be married priests. And, you know, I find it very difficult to ... you see I... I didn't use to question things like, whether the resurrection actually took place, or think Adam and Eve is a mess so why do we need to be redeemed, I never thought of those, I probably never would have thought of them had it not been for the Council [Second Vatican Council], you know, I really, don't know from one day to the next what I do anymore. It really, in many ways it's a bereavement. Because all these beliefs that I've been brought up with, I now find it increasingly difficult to believe in them, towards the ends of my life.'¹⁷

Rosie's testimony encapsulated the paradox that lay at the heart of post-conciliar Catholicism. She identified a process of 'questioning' as the reason for the survival of her faith, but at the same time lamented the sense of certainty she had lost through this process. Her situation corresponded with what various theorists, perhaps most notably French post-structuralists such as Jean-François Lyotard, have identified as the 'postmodern condition' – a sense of meaninglessness and nullity brought about by the deconstruction of recognisable maxims and

¹⁶ Rosie, interviewed 11/09/2012.

¹⁷ Rosie, interviewed 11/09/2012.

metanarratives.¹⁸ In this sense, her memories affirmed elements of Brown's model of 'post-modern' cultural transition, while offering a very different evaluation of this transition.

Rosie's questioning of her 'pick and mix' Catholicism chimed with a recent trend in the wider historiography of the post-war. Avner Offer, among others, has challenged the apparent virtues of increased 'choice' in the post-war. He argued that the 'affluence' of 1940s and 1950s Britain did not amount to an improvement in 'well-being'. In fact, the capacity for personal and social commitment was undermined by the 'flow of novelty' according to Offer, as expanded options brought new challenges to interpersonal relations, psychological health and heterosexual love -

'Affluence breeds impatience, and impatience undermines well-being...the paradox of affluence and its challenge is that the flow of new rewards can undermine the capacity to enjoy them.'¹⁹

Just as Rosie reframed the way she interpreted her 'pick and mix' Catholicism in her later years, so Offer encouraged us to reassess the way material 'freedom of choice' is gauged and evaluated. The values that underpin a narrative of 'liberation', a narrative which dominates the historiographies of both post-war Catholicism and English society, are destabilised by these accounts of personal change.

Nevertheless, Rosie and the orthodox interviewees represented a select minority within the sample in the way they interpreted post-war cultural change. 'Liberal' interviewees used a range of phrases to describe a change in their sex lives, the most popularly referenced, although not necessarily unreservedly subscribed to, being 'sexual liberation' – 'I was not sexually liberated until, well almost my forties. It took that long!'²⁰ This interviewee was typical of many in that she was aware that her own 'liberation' occurred at a later stage than that of 'normal', non-Catholic women. There was also a sense of inevitability about the way she remembered her transition which accorded with Brown's teleological narrative of sexual emancipation.²¹ Other 'liberals' were less comfortable with this descriptor. Lynn explained that she did not begin to enjoy sex until the later stages of her marriage when she suddenly uncovered her 'potential', but described 'sexual liberation' as 'your [the interviewer's] phrase'. She preferred instead the word 'maturing' - 'I matured, I grew up. Simple as that'.²² Although I did use the phrase 'sexual liberation' in the interview, it was always in the context of describing other historians' views and was appended with physical quotation marks. I even made it clear at the start of the

¹⁸ J. Lyotard, *The post-modern condition: a report on knowledge*, (Minnesota, 1984).

¹⁹ A Offer, *The challenge of affluence: Self-control and wellbeing in the United States and Britain since 1950* (Oxford, 2006), p.1.

²⁰ Elizabeth, interviewed 08/02/2014.

²¹ Brown, *Death of Christian Britain*.

²² Lynn, interviewed 12/04/2012.

interview that it was a phrase I wanted to interrogate through the interviews. Lynn's 'your' grouped me together with other academic appraisals of women's sexuality, of which, she explained, she was often sceptical. Lynn was later to accede that the term liberation fairly described her experience after all, and went on to reflect on her reluctance to use the term – she did not want to render herself and other Catholic women passive objects 'in need of freeing'. She stressed that 'It was something I did, I decided and it took me a long time to work round.'²³ This will to take ownership of her liberation rather than attributing it to external cultural, political or technological forces represented a common theme within the interviews.

Aside from 'liberation', phrases such as 'freeing up', 'release' and 'emancipation' were used to describe a momentous shift in the interviewees' sex lives during later marriage. Although these linguistic divergences reflected the heterodox and varying nature of the changes that were described, there were also significant commonalities in the interviewees' liberation narratives. Firstly, it should be noted that it was an ostensibly positive change that was remembered. This assessment may seem a little obtuse, but what was described was a transition from being 'unhappy', 'un-satisfied' and 'frustrated' to 'happy', 'free' and 'fulfilled'. It was a story of discovering, uncovering or increasing physical and emotional pleasure. Margaret explained that she had never had an orgasm before she reached her late thirties -

Margaret - 'I never, never, never, never had an orgasm, can you believe that! And my sister hasn't either still, I mean I have since, with a vengeance!'

DG – Really, did you know what it was then?

Margaret - I didn't until it began to click, I remember on holiday we discovered something that made me feel really nice, and then I recalled then when I was a little girl in the war, dying to go to the loo, and then this wonderful feeling, when I was eight or nine this was, I dare say school children now go through the same thing, and little boys, and I hadn't connected that little feeling with what was happening when you made love.

DG – when did you make that connection then?

Margaret - Erm... I suppose after we'd been married and had all the children, it had never dawned on me before.'²⁴

A 'sexual awakening' was even framed in a positive light by an interviewee for whom this process resulted in the annulment of her marriage. June explained that her marriage had 'worked fine' when her and her husband had 'things to do' in their 30s, but that they both 'went off the

²³ Ibid.

²⁴ Margaret, interviewed 29/09/2013.

rails' in their forties - 'I wasn't really awakened sexually until I had my children, and then you begin to realise 'what am I missing'.²⁵ Both she and her husband had affairs at this stage – it was only with this second partner that June 'achieved an orgasm'. June spoke of the pain that the breakup of her marriage caused her and her family, but again emphasised how she thanked God every day that she had been through the process - 'the real shame is that we didn't ...recognise , didn't recognise ourselves earlier.'²⁶

The expression 'recognise ourselves' was symptomatic of a second commonality that ran through many of the interviewees' liberation narratives. Both Margaret and June remembered their sexual awakenings as acts of self-discovery. Indeed, the word 'self' was startlingly prevalent in many of the interviewees' recollections. Anne decided to go on the Pill after having eight children - 'I don't think I had fully discovered my full self until this happened.'²⁷ We will be delving deeper into Anne's change later in the chapter, but at this point I want to examine what exactly this 'self' was that was being discovered. It was a process of 'discovering', 'uncovering' and 'recognising' that tended to be described, as opposed to 'becoming' or 'creating' a new identity. What was implied through this choice of words was a sense of a single, fixed self that had previously been hidden or oppressed but could be illuminated through sexual experience.

Sexual fulfilment was not merely positioned as the vehicle of self-realisation but also the core constituent of this identity. Mary described what she termed her 'sexual enlightenment' in this way –

'I look back on those early years of marriage and can hardly recognise myself! I was a different person. It was not until those years after the children left that I discovered who I really was, who I really am!'²⁸

Although not always set out as directly as this, many of the interviewees echoed Mary in remembering a change in their sex lives as the defining point in the formation of their person they thought themselves to be.

Even amongst the orthodox interviewees, sexuality was understood to be inherently 'personal', a facet of experience that held a particular relationship with individual identity. Elizabeth had converted from the Church of England at the age of eighteen, having spent two years researching and eventually adopting Catholic interpretations of biblical instruction on matters such as transubstantiation. Despite this theological adherence to what she considered the 'literal

²⁵ June, interviewed 20/02/2013.

²⁶ Ibid.

²⁷ Anne, interviewed 24/3/2012.

²⁸ Mary, interviewed 02/10/2013.

truth of the Gospel', she believed that sexual morality, notably contraceptive practice, was a matter for individual conscience rather than doctrinal law -

'DG – Do you feel that people who don't 'practice the faith' [use artificial means] should be refused communion?

Elizabeth - No I don't feel that. On this matter, I don't really feel it's a sin unless one feels personally it's a sin, which I just do.'²⁹

Elizabeth accorded with 'liberal' Catholics in the way she separated out sexual morality from other matters of faith and endowed it with a distinctively personal, subjective significance.

How then do these personal accounts of Catholic 'self-discovery' relate to wider, historical narratives of sexual change? The link that the interviewees forged between sexuality and individual identity is one that has been considered a peculiarly 'modern' phenomenon by a host of sexual theorists. For the likes of Foucault and Lacquer, this form of subjectivity was born at the turn of the century with the emergence of new regimes of expertise and inspection such as psychology, sociology and criminology.³⁰ The interviewees' testimony seems to substantiate this hypothesis in some ways – the discourse of the 'self' that proved so popular among the interviewees had an undeniably Freudian flavour to it. Indeed, 'orthodox' interviewees adhered to this psychoanalytical discourse to a greater degree than the liberals. Returning to Elizabeth, she explained that the Pill and its 'sexual liberation' had ushered in an era of unbridled hedonism with little regard for morals and meaning -

'As far as sex is concerned, I don't think one should sleep around. It's a precious commodity and once a girl sleeps around it devalues it for her as well as everything else it then becomes nothing, its like will you have a cigarette or a sweet, which I think is terrible and very sad, because they no longer have any other meaning to it, its animal.'³¹

Elizabeth repeatedly returned to the word 'animal' to describe the state of women's 'liberated' sexuality, juxtaposing this with the 'self-restraint' that Catholicism encouraged. Both 'orthodox' and 'liberal' Catholics positioned sexuality as the mainspring of an animalistic, instinctive self. For 'orthodox' women this self was to be resisted and mastered through Catholic commitment, just as the Pope had encouraged in *Humanae Vitae*. For 'liberals', this self was to be discovered and expressed as a means of augmenting Catholic commitment.

²⁹ Ibid.

³⁰ Foucault, *History of Sexuality*, pp. 51-74, T. Lacquer, *Solitary Sex: A cultural history of masturbation*, (New York, 2003).

³¹ Elizabeth, interviewed 15/07/2013.

In variance with Foucault and Lacquer's models, many of the interviewees made a claim for this modern, sexualised self emerging in the course of their own lifetimes rather than sixty years earlier. As one interviewee said –

‘Things are never going to be like they were for my mother’s generation. Sex has changed so much in the last fifty years, it’s so important now, it’s everything to you and your marriage. I just don’t think it was the same, being a Catholic, in my parent’s time’.³²

If both liberal and orthodox interviewees constructed their selfhood as essentially sexual, they also agreed that this was a connection which had really only solidified in the post-war years for Catholics. The idea that Catholics ‘lagged behind the rest of society’ in terms of their personal sexual identities is one that has been advanced by the likes of Hera Cook and Michael Hornsby-Smith.³³ However, we should be cautious when defining this as an exclusively Catholic anomaly. Stevi Jackson speaks of a truly ‘sexual self’ only emerging in the decades after the 1960s, when a proliferation of ‘sexual scripts’ were thrust into peoples’ consciousness by various cultural agencies.³⁴ The operation of the mass media was not lost on the interviewees – Doreen pointed to the ‘modern obsession with sex in films and the media’ making it an ‘inescapable part of everyone’.³⁵ Ken Plummer maintains that Foucault’s account ‘neglects the rise of mass media in all its diverse forms [which Plummer argues ‘took off’ in the 1960s] and it provides little space for the generation of particular kinds of stories at different times.’³⁶ Various historians of modern Britain have argued that new modes of ‘self-fashioning’ emerged in the course of the twentieth century.³⁷ While the ‘sexual self’ that the interviewees composed in the course of the interviews demonstrated the continuing currency of a Freudian-behaviourist notion of human nature to a particular Catholic generation, it should also be viewed as a ‘storied’ construct that reflected the way Catholic subjectivities had been reshaped by a burgeoning post-war sexual culture. Whether traced back to the start of the century or considered a specifically sixties phenomenon, sex had assumed an unprecedented position in Catholic self-identities by the start of the 1980s. As the next section shows, the emergence of a Catholic sexual self held

³² Lydia, interviewed 20/03/2013.

³³ Cook, *The Long Sexual Revolution*, p.304, Hornsby-Smith, *Catholics in England*, p.7.

³⁴ ‘Heightened reflexive self-awareness has converged with the growth in the significance of sexuality, creating the conditions for a highly self-conscious sense of sexual subjectivity and opportunities for endless sexual self-telling’ S. Jackson, ‘The sexual self in late modernity’ in M. Kimmel, (ed.) *The Sexual Self: the Construction of Sexual Scripts*(USA, 2007) pp.3-15.

³⁵ Doreen, interviewed 11/08/2012.

³⁶ K. Plummer, *Sexual Stories*, p.123.

³⁷ The emergence of a specifically ‘modern’ sense of self has also been located in the first half of the twentieth century. For example, Matt Houlbrook has explored the relationship between understandings of selfhood and a burgeoning fictional culture in the 1920s. M. Houlbrook, ‘A Pin to see the Peepshow: Culture, Fiction and Selfhood in Edith Thompson’s Letters, 1921-1922’, *Past and Present*, 207, (2010) pp. 215-249.

profound implications for the way religious belief systems were understood and positioned in relation to this core identity.

Changing conceptions of religious belief

Charles Taylor has argued that since the 1960s an era of 'expressive individualism' has taken hold in the West, in which religious practice is not only viewed as a personal choice but also must make sense in terms of one's 'spiritual development'.³⁸ It must now enable the 'pursuit of happiness', happiness which is increasingly defined by sensual and sexual fulfilment.³⁹ This section takes Taylor's claims as a starting point from which to assess the changes in religiosity that the interviewees narrated. These changes often coincided with the 'sexual awakenings' of later marriage and were recalled in a similar language of enlightenment and emancipation. However, housed within these stories of spiritual transformation was a reconceptualisation of the religious. 'Liberal' interviewees described a process of 'compartmentalisation' that saw their Catholic religiosity, in terms of a set of beliefs, experiences and sentiments, positioned in a new, extrinsic category. While this process of compartmentalisation was identified as something of a life-vessel for their Catholic identity, it also formed a lasting divide between matters of faith and the body.

Teresa, who had spoken about later marriage as the point at which she began to realise what she was 'missing' sexually, explained that her religiosity hardly changed at all from her youth until she was in her mid-forties -

'At that time it was crucial, at that time if I had not developed some sort of spiritual life, sort of personal relationship with God ...'⁴⁰

Teresa trailed off here, but it was clear that she attributed the survival of her faith to the changes that occurred in her later marriage. A key manifestation of this 'spiritual life' was a change in her 'prayer life' - a phrase which mirrored the more colloquially used 'sex life'. She described a shift from 'box ticking' to a 'personalised' form of prayer which related to her everyday life -

'So I would be saying, in those early years of marriage I would be saying my prayers but it was the box mentality, you know, saying my prayers to God were all about adoration and confession, not necessarily linked to my day to day living'⁴¹

³⁸ C. Taylor, *A Secular Age*, p.473.

³⁹ Ibid., p. 636.

⁴⁰ Teresa, interviewed 04/04/2012.

⁴¹ Ibid.

Prayer shifted from a routine of doctrinal reassertion to something that informed and was informed by Teresa's 'day to day' living. Although personal petitions had always been a part of their worship, many of the interviewees were praying about everyday events more than ever before by the later stages of their marriage, addressing topics such as 'family health', 'the kids' sport results' and 'things at work'.⁴² This movement towards an active prayer life where prayers were constructed by the individual represented a common feature of many of the interviewees' later marriages. Teresa actually pin pointed the moment when this personalised form of faith emerged -

'I went to confession at this Walsingham conference, I must have been approaching 50 at time, and this lovely priest and he said, instead of these two Hail Marys and one Our Father sort of thing, for your penance, I want you to just go out and look at the crucifix and say, you did this for me. Well... you know, I use that such a lot you know, but everyone can say that, you did this for me so that was when I started to develop a spiritual life, but the formal vehicles of the Church, actually no help at all (chuckles) I've actually never thought of it like that before, but no help at all' ⁴³

Teresa, like so many other interviewees, remembered later marriage as a period when her faith started to work for her rather than her for it. She became the agent within her beliefs, with her the 'doer' and her beliefs the 'done to'. This shift was remembered positively, just as her 'sexual liberation' had been, and allowed her to maintain her Catholic identity at a time when it was losing its meaning.

The declining devotion to a formalised version of prayer was exemplified by changing attitudes towards the Rosary. Katherine said the Rosary on a regular basis in her early marriage- she recalled attending the Rosary Crusade at West Ham's football ground Upton Park with her family as a teenage girl.⁴⁴ The Rosary Crusade was initiated in 1952 - as many as 100,000 spectators gathered at Wembley Stadium to hear the words of its charismatic leader Fr Patrick Peyton. A key component of the Crusade mission was encouraging the family to say the Rosary together every day, which it espoused under the mantra 'The Family that Prays Together Stays Together'.⁴⁵ Aside from the distinctly 'pre-conciliar' connection between Catholic ideals and traditional family values that Alana Harris has explored in relation to this movement, the Rosary Crusade epitomised the reassertion of a certain type of formalised but also communal prayer

⁴² Doreen interviewed 11/08/2012, Bridget interviewed 16/04/2013.

⁴³ Teresa, interviewed 4/4/2012.

⁴⁴ Katherine interviewed 14/07/2013.

⁴⁵ Ibid.

that was to become increasingly obsolete in the following decades. When asked how her prayer life had changed, Katherine's first response was - 'Well I ditched the Rosary! Vatican II was a big boost for my faith in that way!'⁴⁶ Other interviewees spoke of their distaste for the Rosary's repetitiveness - 'It was so boring! The main challenge was making sure my sister didn't make me laugh in it!'⁴⁷

It was not just boredom that typified the interviewees' memories of the Rosary, but a deeper problem with the form of religiosity that it represented. Georgina described it as a way of 'controlling your mind and time through repetition' and this 'psychologically oppressive' interpretation of the Rosary was echoed by many respondents.⁴⁸

'I remember thinking, not too long ago, maybe just fifteen years ago, that this is a waste of my time and God's time. It does not relate to my life, my self, in any way.'⁴⁹

We see the term 'self' appear again here - the issue that many Catholic women developed with the Rosary and formalised prayer in general was its inability to relate to their individual lives. There were interviewees for whom the Rosary remained an important part of their worship. Sorcha still said the Rosary on a weekly basis, explaining that as a child she 'never used to think too much about it'. Since her children had grown up she had started devoting each decade [one Our Father, Ten Hail Marys and One Glory Be To The Father] to a member of her family, often one of her grandchildren. 'It means more to me that way, I concentrate harder ... it makes it something real to me'.⁵⁰ Even amongst those who continued to say the Rosary, its meaning had been augmented by a personalisation in their later marriage. The compulsion to take ownership of prayer, to link it to personal, subjective experience represented a defining feature of Catholic women's religious development.

While the 'self' provided the object of many of the interviewees' changing religiosities, the word 'questioning' was often used to describe the process through which this self was realised. For Marian, her 'questioning' was a point of pride and reflected the strength of her faith compared to her more 'orthodox' mother -

'My mother, actually didn't have the same, didn't have as much faith as me and therefore didn't question as much as me, to question you must have faith'⁵¹

⁴⁶ Ibid.

⁴⁷ Joan, interviewed 19/09/2013.

⁴⁸ Georgina, interviewed 22/11/2012.

⁴⁹ Mary, interviewed 02/10/2013.

⁵⁰ Sorcha, interviewed 09/01/2014.

⁵¹ Marian, interviewed 26/09/2013.

In keeping with her 'liberal' Catholic identity, 'questioning' was interpreted by Marian as not only an enabler but also the consequence of a quantifiably stronger faith. A number of the interviewees spoke of their mothers not being able to question in the way they had. In this way, the interviewees positioned themselves as the pivotal generation in the development of women's Catholicism – the group that permanently dismantled an infantile, restrictive form of religiosity. They spoke of how women encountered more resistance to 'questioning' than men. Katherine recalled asking a question at a prayer group in the late 1960s and being told by one of the leaders of the group "not to worry or else you'll get in a muddle". I said 'I don't mind getting in a muddle!' That was the point!"⁵²

In the course of many of the 'liberal' interviewees' later marriage, their Catholic faith had become thought of as a set of questions rather than answers. This transition was often remembered in a positive, liberating light, as the process that resurrected their dwindling Catholic affiliation. Implicitly tied up with this 'liberation' though, was the erection of a conceptual divide between their religious beliefs and sense of self. Throughout the interviews their religiosity was defined as an 'aspect', 'side' or 'part' of their lives. Teresa's use of the phrase 'prayer life' was indicative of the active compartmentalisation that many of the liberal interviewees employed when discussing their religiosity.⁵³ When I explained at the start of our interview that I was interested in uncovering the reciprocal links that exist between religious and sexual experiences, she intervened with – 'But there aren't many links if it's all in compartments ... It only informs it in a negative way'. She went on to explain that her faith could only survive by 'completely separating my faith out from myself'.⁵⁴ 'Compartments', 'categories' and 'separations' were key terms that the liberal interviewees drew on when composing their narratives of personal religious development.

In direct contrast, Elizabeth stressed how she could never compartmentalise her sexual and religious experiences. When she spoke of her 'repulsion' at the idea of the Pill distorting her 'body's natural rhythms', I asked whether it was more of a physical rather than spiritual issue that she had with it. She stressed emphatically that the two could not be separated 'Well I think they were one and the same thing, you mustn't compartmentalise.'⁵⁵ Elizabeth was the first 'orthodox' interviewee I had spoken to and my line of questioning was evidently tailored to a 'liberal' response. She returned to the language of compartmentalisation later in the interview - 'I've never felt that my life is compartmented... I've not divided anything up and I'm not divided with my faith either because I am just one person.'⁵⁶ This discourse of

⁵² Katherine, interviewed 14/07/2013.

⁵³ Teresa, interviewed 04/04/2012.

⁵⁴ Ibid.

⁵⁵ Elizabeth, interviewed 15/07/2013.

⁵⁶ Ibid.

‘compartmentalising’ or ‘categorising’ was a key point of divergence between the ‘liberal’ and ‘orthodox’ interviewees. Just like the ‘self’, both sets of women used the term, but with directly opposing attitudes towards it.

For many liberal Catholic women, later marriage saw their faith move into a new conceptual space. It was a space that was defined by two key features; it stood outside their sense of self, a set of abstract questions and codes to be interrogated by this central agent. It was also a space that was juxtaposed to the physical, profane demands of sexuality. In many ways, the interviewees’ testimony seems to substantiate Charles Taylor’s philosophical postulations. The idea of ‘expressive individualism’, whereby religious beliefs needed to fit in with the quest for personal self-discovery, was a conspicuous presence in almost all the interviews.⁵⁷ The apparent virtues of this liberated state were not unanimously subscribed to though, with the interviewees critiquing, challenging and problematising its apparent virtues. In a post-1960s setting, a ‘liberation narrative’ became an unavoidable discourse for Catholic individuals, providing a point of reference within and against which their religious identities could be defined.

If this section has remained couched at a level of discourse, the next uses the interviewees’ testimony to reconstruct that enigmatic elixir of the oral historian - lived experience. It moves on to provide a closer examination of the moments within which these religious and sexual changes occurred, focusing on a topic that was at the centre of every interview without exception; birth control.

Changes in contraceptive morality

The advent of affordable, effective means of birth control has been frequently identified as the defining feature of a ‘sexual revolution’. In her seminal book The Long Sexual Revolution, Hera Cook argued that the introduction of ‘reliable contraception’ was a ‘substantial improvement, amounting to a transformation, in the lives of English women over the past two centuries’.⁵⁸ Cook maintained that the Pill in particular offered women in England a previously unparalleled means of separating sex from procreation – ‘It increased the control of fear and allowed a greater experience of pleasure and increased emotional aspirations’⁵⁹. This association between the Pill and the idea of a ‘sexual revolution’ was echoed in the interviews. When asked what the term ‘sexual revolution’ meant to them, both ‘liberal’ and ‘orthodox’ interviewees promptly spoke of the Pill - ‘Well it was all bound up with the contraceptive Pill’, ‘The Pill was

⁵⁷ Taylor, A Secular Age, p.473.

⁵⁸ Cook, The Long Sexual Revolution, p.1.

⁵⁹ Ibid.

very important I think'.⁶⁰ Bridget never used the Pill herself and opposed it on religious grounds, but recognised that 'the change it has wrought for women has been absolutely revolutionary, oh yes, revolutionary'.⁶¹ Although Lara Marks is right in pointing out that it is now commonplace for the Pill to be identified as the 'catalyst of the revolution', it seems the matter of birth control holds a position of particular, inflated significance in Catholic women's image of post-war cultural change.⁶²

At the heart of the personal sexual and religious changes that the 'liberal' interviewees described was the subject of birth control. The decision to use artificial means of contraception was remembered by many interviewees as the key that unlocked their 'sexual self'. Of the twenty six individuals spoken to, twenty-one took up artificial means of contraception during their marriage, having previously abstained from it for religious reasons. For nineteen of the interviewees, this decision was one that was not taken until later marriage. It was the defining factor that marked a break in their marital narratives. The following two sections explore how these personally and historically ground-breaking decisions were made, paying a close attention to the explanations that the interviewees emphasised.

In accordance with Cook's assertions, the decision to take up artificial means of birth control was remembered as one that greatly increased the experience of sexual pleasure. Just under half of the interviewees explained that they did not have an orgasm until after taking up artificial means of birth control, in most cases the Pill. Lynn explained that

'I didn't find my sexual power, orgasm, until I had made the decision to go on the Pill. So that's maybe an interesting point for you. ... but that was in the seventies that wasn't in the sixties'.⁶³

She emphasised how much of an 'inhibitor' the fear of pregnancy had been in her early marriage, claiming that 'I'm sure a lot of women my age would tell you that'.⁶⁴ Katherine tried the Pill when she was in her mid-thirties, but finding that the 'chemicals didn't agree' with her, started using condoms. Again affirming Cook's conclusions, she found that 'sex was so much more pleasurable after that. The fear had gone and it became a completely different experience'.⁶⁵

The significance of the decision to use artificial means of contraception was not simply found in the heightened sexual pleasure it enabled, but also the fundamental rupture it signified in the

⁶⁰ June, interviewed 20/02/2013, Sorchia, interviewed 15/04/2013.

⁶¹ Bridget, interviewed 16/04/2013.

⁶² L. Marks, *Sexual Chemistry*, p.1.

⁶³ Lynn, interviewed 12/04/2012.

⁶⁴ Ibid.

⁶⁵ Katherine, interviewed 14/07/2013.

relationship between the interviewees' Catholic religiosity and sexual morality. For many Catholics, it was the first time they had knowingly contravened the Church's official teaching. Margaret pointed out that

‘It was the starting point really. I remember thinking, if the Church is wrong about this, it could be wrong about other things’.⁶⁶

The subject of birth control therefore stood at the cornerstone of the ‘liberal’ interviewees’ life stories and their continuing religious identities. The way these changes in contraceptive theology have been explained by various intellectual authorities reveals much about how the religious and the sexual have been understood in a post-war setting.

The moment of transition– discursive and experiential explanations

Just as for David Lodge's characters hell was there one minute and gone the next, so contraception went from being ‘intrinsically evil’, to not ‘intrinsically evil’ for large swathes of Britain's Catholic community in an equally abrupt and definitive manner.⁶⁷ Almost all of the liberal interviewees stressed two distinctive features of this shift. One: that they entirely and earnestly believed in the early years of their marriage that artificial means of birth control were sinful and would prevent them from salvation. Their change in attitude was not the realisation of a repressed belief in the legitimacy of contraception that had always been harboured in some way, and I will not be probing into the realms of their subconscious or even unconscious with an amateur psychoanalytical flash light. Two: the change itself was remembered as strikingly sudden; all the liberal interviewees acknowledged a longer period of ‘questioning’ that varied in length from a few weeks to over a decade, but the decision itself was defined by a resolute immediacy. This section interrogates the interplay between these gradual and transient factors, between the temporal and the linguistic explanations that the interviewees identified. It addresses two related questions; firstly, how and why Catholic women changed their beliefs on the morality of birth control. Secondly, how we as historians can access these changes in personal religiosity, and through this, understand the way they related to their wider historical setting.

It will be argued here that the historian should accommodate the temporal, emotional and experiential components of these highly subjective decisions. As we have seen, intellectual appraisals of personal religiosity tend to privilege the discursive over the experiential. From Emile Durkheim at the start of the twentieth century through to Peter Berger at its end, social

⁶⁶ Margaret, interviewed 29/09/2013.

⁶⁷ D. Lodge, *How far can you go?*, p.113.

scientists have continually attributed changes in religious belief to the operation of liberating ideas and languages.⁶⁸ Despite his intention to break away from pejorative sociological readings of religion, Brown's model of 'discursive Christianity' is also predicated on this discursive approach. The women I spoke to acknowledged the importance of the new ideas they came across in the 1960s, but their testimony placed an emphasis on the actual moment these changes occurred within. Oral history allows us to revisit these moments, uncovering the emotional and experiential components of religious sensibilities. As we have seen in the previous chapter, these components received surprisingly little attention in the Catholic birth control debate of the 1960s. Beyond this, oral testimony provides an unparalleled window into the way religious and sexual experiences are compartmentalised in modern Britain, both linguistically and physically. When attempting to understand these shifts in personal religiosity, the questions of where and when may be just as valuable as why and how.

The testimony of a single interviewee is focused on here, using her memories as a 'telling case' through which to explore the experiences of the other interviewees. The difference between a 'telling' case and a 'typical' case has been outlined by Dorothy Sheridan, Brian Street and David Bloome in their analysis of qualitative material gathered for the Mass Observation Project –

'The search for a 'typical' case for analytical exposition is likely to be less fruitful than the search for a 'telling' case in which the particular circumstances surrounding a case serve to make previously obscured theoretical relationships suddenly apparent. Case studies used in this way are clearly more than 'apt illustrations'. Instead, they are means whereby general theory may be developed'⁶⁹

As such, the following excerpt does not simply illuminate aspects of Catholic marital experience, but provides a unique insight into the way this experience has been and should be understood by intellectual observers. At this point, I would like to introduce Anne. Anne had eight children between 1950 and 1965, with her first being born when she was twenty. Anne described herself as a practicing 'liberal Catholic' who attended Church on a Sunday all her life. She lived in a few small towns in the South of England and described her background as 'working class'.⁷⁰ Up to the point in the interview that we will be attending to, our discussion had largely comprised of Anne detailing the great pain and suffering she had experienced while using Natural Family Planning. She spoke of the 'immense emotional and physical frustration' that she and her husband felt in the periods when they could not have sex. She also spoke of the

⁶⁸ E. Durkheim, *The Elementary Forms of the Religious Life*, translated by Carol Cosman (Oxford, 1912), P Berger, *The Sacred Canopy: Elements of a Sociological Theory of Religion*, (Anchor, 1967).

⁶⁹ D. Sheridan, B. Street and D. Bloome, *Writing Ourselves: Mass Observation and Literacy Practices*, (New Jersey, 2000) p. 107.

⁷⁰ Anne, interviewed 24/3/12.

resulting pressure and lack of spontaneity felt when they could which led to instances of impotence, premature ejaculation and an inability for both partners to climax.⁷¹ Although she explained that more often than not sex was ‘fabulous’ and ‘very physically satisfying’ throughout her marriage, by the time Anne had had her eighth child, the fear of another pregnancy was leaving her in a state of ‘perpetual turmoil in her own bedroom’.⁷² When I asked Anne why she had not used a form of contraception, she stated simply ‘Well, I thought it was wrong. I thought it was completely wrong.’⁷³

Anne recalled speaking about her contraceptive troubles in confession at some point in the middle of the 1960s. The priest encouraged her to go on the Pill. I commented that it must have been rare for a priest to give advice that explicitly contravened the Church’s existing teaching, but Anne stressed emphatically that it was not rare at all - such was the prevailing belief that a change in the Church’s teaching was imminent. I then asked Anne how she responded to this advice, and whether she did go on the Pill. This was her response-

‘I didn’t at that time. I should think it was nearly a year before I really got there. And it ... I read everything I could read. I just read around, I’ve never not been a reader. And ... I read and I prayed, I prayed in agony. I don’t think, I don’t think anybody can know the agony that women who wanted to be true to God, true to their beliefs went through. And I can remember exactly when I changed my mind. I was kneeling saying my prayers in the evening, by my bed, as I used to at that time, and I was thinking when we get into bed we’re going to make love, I knew it, I just knew it... and ... I thought ... I can not remember the words... but I was really tormented...and then I suddenly had a flash – ‘don’t worry, forget it, don’t worry, don’t worry any more about this ever, about this, this...’ and I never have since. And I went straight to the doctor and asked to go on the pill.’⁷⁴

As stated earlier, I want to reflect on the kind of questions the historian should be asking to try and understand how changes in personal religiosity, like the one presented in Anne’s rather startling recollection, related to their wider historical context. By that I do not simply mean which questions should be asked in the interview, but the intellectual frameworks within which this piece of testimony should be placed.

⁷¹ Anne, interviewed 24/3/12.

⁷² Ibid.

⁷³ Ibid.

⁷⁴ Ibid.

How does Anne's testimony relate to what Brown says was happening in the 1960s? The use of the word 'flash' to describe the very moment of her change suggests both a suddenness and a sense of enlightenment. The link between secularisation narratives and a language of illumination is one that has been observed many times before. For Brown, it was the newly available ideas and discourses of 'sexual liberation' that provided British women with the necessary language to abruptly reject Christian moral codes and see the light.⁷⁵ Anne did speak of the reading she did to try and help her make sense of the situation she was in. She referenced the work of a collection of progressive Catholic writers that had emerged in the 1960s who were attempting to marry the discourses of sexual liberation with Catholic thought. Writers like Jack Dominian, an eminent relationship psychologist and Catholic layman, presented a new theology on married love that valued the centrality of healthy sexual expression to a loving and godly marriage. These authors argued that there were legitimate grounds in existing Catholic teachings to see the use of contraception as a means to facilitating such a union.⁷⁶

How much weight should we grant these new languages of Catholic morality in bringing about Anne's change then? Certainly, this emergent culture introduced Anne and many Catholic women of her generation to an unprecedented set of questions about the authority of the Church in matters of sex. Lynn spoke of the importance of reading Jack Dominian's book The Church and the Sexual Revolution (1971) to her own sense of 'liberation' - 'The theology of pleasure being part of God's design and sexual intimacy being conducive to a lasting marriage ... that was crucial'.⁷⁷ Having completed a PhD in feminist literature herself, Lynn engaged reflexively with the intellectual dimensions of my research to a greater extent than any other interviewee. She went on to reflect on the role of 'discourse' in bringing about her change - 'I didn't even have the discourse ... you can't express things if the discourse is not available to you'.⁷⁸

However, many of the interviewees stressed that they did not come across the work of Jack Dominian or any of the other liberal Catholic theologians until well after the 1960s. Indeed, for a large majority of the interviewees, these theological writings were not properly engaged with until after they took up artificial means of birth control. Patricia explained that

'I was sort of ... aware of Dominian's stuff at that time [the 1960s], people were talking about him, but I didn't really sit down and read it for myself until much later, in the eighties at least, after I'd been on the Pill for almost ten years.'⁷⁹

⁷⁵ Brown, The Death of Christian Britain.

⁷⁶ J. Dominian, The Church and the Sexual Revolution, (London, 1971).

⁷⁷ Lynn, interviewed 12/04/2012.

⁷⁸ Ibid.

⁷⁹ Patricia, interviewed 03/05/2013.

The general feeling was that the work of these authors ‘confirmed’ existing beliefs rather than forged them in the first place. Joan stated that ‘I think Jack Dominican’s ideas confirmed what I already knew to be the case. It helped me fit things together, but I had already made my mind up’.⁸⁰ Even for those that did read Dominican’s work in the 1960s, they did not elaborate much on his writings. Mary was typical in the way her responses became notably brief when probed about the topic -

‘DG – In the 1960s, bound up with the ideas of Vatican II, ‘liberal’ Catholics were talking about a new theology on married love, sex being about conjugal love as much as it is about procreation...

Mary - Yes, well of course it is.

DG – I was wondering if you can remember whether you were aware of authors like Jack Dominican in the 1960s?

Mary - Oh yes yes, I know him.

DG – And you read his work in the 1960s?

Mary - Yes yes absolutely, and I was aware of the writings of your grandfather.

DG – Yes he was producing similar stuff. I was wondering about how these new ideas about the Church’s teaching on sex changed your views on things like contraception?

Mary - It confirmed ideas I already had. What we had decided.

DG – Did you read this literature a lot?

Mary -I suppose a bit’⁸¹

We should recognise that like Mary, Anne also did not directly attribute her change to these ‘liberal’ writings. She did not actually spend much time talking about the progressive Catholic authors or their ideas at all, even when explicitly prompted later in the interview.⁸² It may well have been a flash of wording that marked her shift in attitude, but before this flash, Anne flagged up the fact that she ‘can not remember the words’.⁸³ This could be interpreted as the consequence of a failing memory, but it could also be seen to reflect the aspects of this moment that Anne saw as significant. It seems peculiar that Anne would not remember the wording of her revelation when her memory was proficient enough to specify many other details about this and other experiences from the time. What I am suggesting is that the selections that are present in Anne’s recollection of this ‘flash’ reveal the limited role of linguistic and abstracted discourses and emphasise the centrality of the temporal and emotional moment of experience.

⁸⁰ Joan, interviewed 19/09/2013.

⁸¹ Mary, interviewed 02/10/2013.

⁸² Anne, interviewed 24/03/2012.

⁸³ Ibid.

The questions that were raised by writers like Jack Dominian in the form of words and text still needed to be answered by Catholic women in the bedroom.

Foucault's seminal contributions to the history of sexuality provide another framework through which to understand Anne's testimony. Foucault maintains that Christianity did not introduce specific rules of sexual morality, such as an opposition to things like polygamy, homosexuality and the separation of sex and procreation (these ideas predated the emergence of organised Christianity Foucault tells us), but introduced instead certain procedures of self-regulation for inculcating these moral codes. He describes these mechanisms as 'technologies of the self'; processes such as internalisation, alerting one's self to one's own weaknesses and the compulsion to perpetually confess a hidden truth of the self.⁸⁴ These processes offer a useful way of thinking about Anne's change – despite being fully conscious of the progressive theology on contraceptive morality that was available to her, the act of rejecting the Church's teaching was described as an internalised moment of self-articulation. Anne could only reject the Church's teaching by discarding the processes through which she governed and policed herself. She actually started using the word 'self' for the first time in the interview when talking about the period after her change. She recalled lying in bed on the night *Humanae Vitae* was published with her husband Paul, who Anne stressed always left contraceptive decisions up to her, and being asked what she was going to do. She explained to him that she had made her decision and 'believed in her whole self' that she was right – she maintained that she has not felt any guilt or remorse about her contraceptive behaviour since her moment of revelation.⁸⁵

Do these recollections point to a historicised change in the way these 'technologies of the self' worked? This is an interesting question certainly, but there are a few problems with a Foucauldian reading of Anne's testimony. Foucault maintained that these procedures could only function through what he called the 'figure of the pastorate' – a spiritual authority who monitored and directed the moral wellbeing of society.⁸⁶ Anne's disregard for the authority of her pastor, the priest, was clear to see – even when she was explicitly told to go on the Pill in confession, it was over a year before she actually made her decision. Foucault's approach may offer a useful alternative to the pervasive, 'top down' model of power relations in which Catholic women are continually positioned as inert victims, but there is still a sense that they are being 'acted upon' rather than 'acting'. The external institutions and structures that are usually identified as the forces of governance are simply replaced by internalised, discursive regimes.

⁸⁴ Foucault, 'Pastoral Power and Political Reason', in (ed.) J Carrette, *Religion and Culture: Michel Foucault*, (New York, 1999) pp.135- 154.

⁸⁵ Anne, interviewed 24/3/2012.

⁸⁶ Foucault, 'Pastoral Power and Political Reason', in (ed.) J. Carrette, *Religion and Culture: Michel Foucault*, (New York, 1999) pp.135- 154.

Just as Brown's model of a 'cultural revolution' rendered Catholic women the irrational others of a secularising modernity, so a Foucauldian framework equally relegates the agency of religious individuals to a mere function of discourse.

The problem with privileging the discursive over the experiential when trying to explain a change in religious belief is that the essence of what an individual is stressing can be overlooked; in this case, the great physical and emotional suffering that Catholic women went through when attempting to keep to the Church's teaching. As Anne stated, 'I don't think anybody can know the agony that women who wanted to be true to God, true to their beliefs went through'.⁸⁷ In their efforts to intellectualise and textualise the decisions of Catholic women, the frameworks offered by Foucault and Brown down play the role of corporeal and emotive sensibilities. As we saw in the first chapter, the central hierarchy's attempt to 'know the agony', or at least the lived experiences, of Catholic women in the 1960s also overlooked these intimate aspects of personal experience. Surprisingly, this was even true of Catholic authorities who advocated a change in contraceptive doctrine. The next chapter on Catholic women's experiences during early marriage demonstrates how oral history, when deployed with the appropriate methodological provisions, can resurrect these neglected drivers of personal and collective change.

Before this though, I want to focus on what Anne did emphasise about this shift. Her testimony stressed a sudden, temporal moment of revelation. She chose to specify the time and space within which this moment occurred – 'And I can remember exactly when I changed my mind. I was kneeling saying my prayers in the evening, by my bed, as I used to at that time'.⁸⁸ When thinking about getting into the bed she was praying next to, sexual thoughts encroached on her religious reflections. The experiential proximity of sexual and spiritual activities in terms of time and space, provided not just the environment but also the very catalyst for Anne's change in thinking. I asked all the interviewees where and when they prayed and where and when had sex in the early years of their marriage, and almost without exception they identified evenings and the bedroom as the settings for both. Anne spoke of starting to see her bedroom as a place of 'frustration and stress', and that she would often begin to feel this anxiety as it got dark.⁸⁹ Indeed, the thermometer and graph that Anne used to calculate her fertility was kept in the top draw of her bedside table alongside her bible and rosary.⁹⁰ If tensions and negotiations between spiritual and sexual activities occupied similar physical spaces for Catholic individuals, then decisions to reject the Church's teaching on contraception should be understood in the context

⁸⁷ Anne, interviewed 24/03/2012.

⁸⁸ Anne, interviewed 24.03.2012.

⁸⁹ Ibid.

⁹⁰ Ibid.

of this material proximity. The next section moves on to explore these shared spaces, mapping the cultural geography of Catholic women's intimate religious and sexual lives.

Shared spaces for the religious and the sexual

Anne was not alone in speaking of the time and space in which sexual activities occurred; a remarkable number of the first set of interviewees who were spoken to specified these details when recalling contraceptive behaviour. In response, I began actively asking about 'where' and 'when'. It was as if these concrete details gave their memories a tangible framework from which to work. Certain neuroscientists would insist that human memory inherently looks to these stabilising points of reference, but the interviewees' tendency to dwell on time and place also spoke of the historical setting within which these shifts in contraceptive practice were lived and understood.⁹¹ To understand why later marriage was such a pivotal life cycle stage for Catholic women's contraceptive behaviour, we must reconstruct the physical, temporal moments that these experiences occurred within. This does not merely allow us to reimagine the circumstances of personal theological change, but reveals how these circumstances were themselves dynamic drivers of change.

By later marriage, Catholic women had more time and space to consider their religious and sexual aspirations than ever before in their married life. Furthermore, they were living through a historical moment when religious contemplation, notably personal prayer, was concentrated into smaller and more specific spaces than it had been just twenty years earlier. They grew up in a world where religious ritual punctuated their days - when they woke up, before meals, at public functions, while many of the places they inhabited were graced with Catholic imagery - schools, women's groups, even many workplaces. By the late 1970s though, many of these dedicated religious times and spaces had dissolved. Catholic women's religiosity had been forced into private spaces, private spaces which were also the domain of sexual activity.

In line with the movement away from traditional, communal forms of worship towards a personalised religiosity as described in this chapter, the intimate space of the bedroom became increasingly viewed as the primary site for spiritual expression. By later marriage, other places of religious activity had either ceased to function in the same way or decreased in relevance - Lydia recalled that

'When I was growing up we used to say a prayer in the classroom at the start of every lesson, you know, it was always there. And even when we were first married I used to pray with the kids on the way to school, say grace round the dinner table before all our

⁹¹ A. Eichenbaum, *The Cognitive Neuroscience of Memory*, (Oxford, 2002).

meals. And of course that was when going to Church meant a lot more to me, it was the House of God. They all seemed to drift away later, it was all saved up for my nightly prayers in my bedroom'.⁹²

Nightly prayers in the bedroom were a popular practice amongst Catholic women, both housewives and those who had taken up paid employment in later marriage. As religious practice retreated from the public realm, so the bedroom emerged as a vital space within which these new, private religiosities could work.

Catholic couples' bedrooms were often adorned with more religious regalia than any other room in the house. Elizabeth kept a phial of holy water on her dressing table beside her make-up and hair brushes, while many of the interviewees had a crucifix nailed to the wall over their marital bed.⁹³ With Jesus' eyes cast down over the scene of sexual activity, religious reminders peppered the intimate landscape of Catholic marriage. Doreen had been taught by her mother to kneel and say her prayers by her bed every night, with her hands clasped together and her elbows resting on the bed. She stopped kneeling beside her bed at 'some point in her forties', saying her prayers when she was 'in bed, just as I went to sleep. After sex if it had happened'.⁹⁴ Even within the confines of the bedroom, prayer and sex were being pushed into closer proximity by later marriage. The top drawer of Anne's bedside table was typical for many Catholic women practising NFP. With thermometers, graphs, pencils, instruction manuals and tubs of Vaseline nestled amongst rosaries, bibles and prayer books, these spaces epitomised the confrontation and attempted conflation of sexual science and Catholic thought in the post-war decades. The sexual and the religious closeted away together, removed from the prying eyes of children and visitors and yet afforded a place of privilege alongside the marital bed.

Later marriage was typified by an increase in time available for the 'personal'. Just as Claire Langhamer has shown how women in the post-war period could pursue leisure activities more easily after their children had grown up, so sexual and religious concerns could also receive more attention at this point.⁹⁵ June spoke of how her evenings 'seemed to become longer' in her mid-forties.⁹⁶ Without the task of feeding and putting to bed young children, Catholic women found themselves with more time to not only have sex, but also contemplate the intricacies of their beliefs. Mary reflected on the spiritual significance of this time of the day –

'I suppose it's practicality – you're free from the hustle and bustle of the day. But there's also something else - it's also about the dark setting in, sleep drawing near. You

⁹² Lydia, interviewed 20/03/2013.

⁹³ Elizabeth interview, 15/03/2013.

⁹⁴ Doreen, interviewed 11/08/2012.

⁹⁵ C. Langhamer, *Women's Leisure*, pp. 133 – 186.

⁹⁶ June, interviewed 19/11/2013.

think back on the day and put things in a different light ... I've started reading a bit of the bible every evening now'⁹⁷

Many of the interviewees spoke of the evening and night as a time that brought to bear questions of faith. Angela reflected on how the moments before sleep brought into focus the mortal dimensions of her faith -

'Before you slip of into silence or sleep, so way after sex, so I say ... I tell you what I often do, I say a little Hail Mary. Because I've seen a lot of suffering, and death – and that's the best bit. 'Now and at the hour of our death' because who knows what's going to happen to you... and so I'm , I just put myself into the hands of God and I say I'm sorry if I've slipped up, that's a very Ignatian thing to say, you say sorry to cover your tracks, I'm sorry if I slipped up, I hope I sleep well, I'm not a long prayer, I pray succinctly but sincerely, and I sleep well.'⁹⁸

For some interviewees, the increased time available in evenings prompted them to think about matters of sexual morality specifically; Mary explained that -

'the evening was when I did most of my thinking about these things [the Church's stance on contraception]. It just happened that way as I grew older, that was when I really started to think about things properly, to reflect on what I really thought.'⁹⁹

Weekends were also freed up from the demands of various family duties. Sunday had always been a particularly busy day for Catholic mothers in the early years of their marriage, with Church attendance in the morning followed by the preparation, eating and washing up of Sunday lunch. Sunday evenings were dedicated to getting the family ready for the week ahead, with little time or energy left for sex. Lydia recalled that once her children had reached their late teens, her Sundays had become 'suspiciously tranquil', and with this, a day free for 'amorous time-wasting'.¹⁰⁰ Callum Brown has argued that Sunday was a 'pious' day for the 1950s household, remembered as a space for 'feminised family-time' – walks in the park, board games and visiting elderly relatives. He maintains that this culture was irrevocably destroyed by the throes of women's sexual liberation, making it 'a day like any other'.¹⁰¹ The interviewees did speak of a shift in their Sunday routines and a resulting increase in the opportunities for sex, but it was a shift that was less about an ideological rejection of 'pious femininity' and more a

⁹⁷ Mary, interviewed 02/10/2013.

⁹⁸ Angela, interviewed 07/01/2014.

⁹⁹ Christina, interviewed 06/01/2014.

¹⁰⁰ Lydia, interviewed 20/03/2013.

¹⁰¹ Brown, *Religion and Society*, p.5, 28.

practical time alleviation made possible by the contraction of domestic duties. It also remained a day that was hardly 'like any other' – many of the interviewees described a Sunday that retained its distinctiveness, a day of 'restfulness', even 'boredom', but one devoted to decidedly 'different' pursuits from the rest of the week.

Given the increased time and space that became available for religious and sexual activity in later marriage, it is little surprise that so many Catholic women were to reconsider their stances towards artificial contraception at this stage. Expanded physical and temporal opportunities encouraged a new form of personal theological contemplation. Bridget insisted that she 'simply did not have the time to even think about things like family planning' in her early marriage – 'births just happened and we got on with it'.¹⁰² June, who we have seen became sexually awakened when she had an affair in her mid-forties, explained that

'I did not have many expectations early on, but then when you have a bit more time and space to sit back and consider things, you begin to realise what you're missing. That's the point, you need the time and space'¹⁰³

The interviewees' sexual aspirations increased in later marriage, a trend that would seem to mirror broader societal changes in female sexuality as described by the like of Hera Cook and Callum Brown. However, the interviewees were again to consider this less a consequence of a raised 'sexual consciousness' brought about by a liberating ideology and more a practical matter of time and space. It was these physical, immanent aspects of everyday experience that were emphasised in their narratives of sexual change.

We have seen that the 'liberation' narratives that the interviewees recounted were predicated on a process of compartmentalisation; an active separation between the religious and the sexual. The culmination of this process was, more often than not, the decision to reject the Church's prohibition of artificial contraception, a decision which was made as religious and sexual activities were being physically forced together like never before. The spatial and temporal grouping of the religious and the sexual was a phenomenon that certainly predated the post-war. The bedroom and evenings had been the principal site of sexual activity for centuries while prayer had been progressively removed from the industrial 'working day' since the eighteenth century.¹⁰⁴ The tie between the two speaks of the perennial nature of the questions they address – questions relating to life and death, human interaction, selfhood and the body.

¹⁰² Bridget, interviewed 16/04/2013.

¹⁰³ June, interviewed 20/02/2013.

¹⁰⁴ Callum Brown documents the removal of prayer from the working day, *The Death of Christian Britain*, pp.145-169.

But there was also something peculiarly ‘modern’ about the secluded, personalised spaces within which these questions were being confronted during the post-war years. It has been widely observed that religion retreated from the ‘public’ realm in the years after the 1960s.¹⁰⁵ Conversely, historians such as Jeffrey Weeks have detailed the paradoxical fate of sex in this period, becoming at once a popularised, ubiquitous topic while at the same time being confined to the ‘private’ - a matter for the individual behind closed doors.¹⁰⁶ Oral history allows us to see how Catholic women’s contraceptive behaviour was affected by these cultural developments in ways that might not otherwise seem clear. But this was not simply a story of shifting lines between the public and private. The emphasis that the interviewees placed on time and place when remembering their changes in contraceptive practice reflected their will to communicate the centrality of material, lived experience. They were eager to show how their theological beliefs on the morality of birth control were inexplicably bound up with day-to-day living, and they appealed to time and space as a means of reinforcing this connection.

This attention to the temporal and spatial dimensions of experience seems to chime with two recent intellectual trends; what Harry Cocks has described as the ‘spatial turn’ in the history of sexuality and the long overdue emergence of what Jennifer Scheper Hughes has dubbed ‘a materialist theory of religion’.¹⁰⁷ As historians like Matt Cook and Matt Houlbrook have sought to demonstrate that ‘sexuality and identity are inseparable from the material networks and spaces that they inhabit’, so practitioners of religious studies have attempted to combat the ‘near absence of the body as an interpretive analytic’ and instead ‘take seriously both the material conditions and conditioned-ness of human existence as well as the material consequences of embodied religious belief and practice’.¹⁰⁸ In short, there has been an attempt to do away with approaches to both sex and religion that obsessively pursue ‘meaning’, and treat them instead as lived moments of experience. As Colin Jones argued at his plenary lecture at the 2014 Social History Conference, historians have made a totem out of causation which has prompted them to overlook the chaotic, sometimes unthinking aspects of human behaviour.¹⁰⁹ This observation is particularly true of scholars of religion. Surely the point is that meaning and causation are embedded *in* quotidian, mundane existence rather than there being a dichotomy between the two. Oral history’s capacity to reconstruct the spatial and temporal materiality that framed this quotidian existence therefore offers an important means of rethinking the way Catholic

¹⁰⁵ For example see G. Davie, Religion in Britain Since 1945: Believing Without belonging, (Oxford, 1994).

¹⁰⁶ J. Weeks, Sex, Politics and Society, (London, 1981).

¹⁰⁷ H. Cocks, ‘Approaches to the history of sexuality since 1700’ in S. Toulalan and K. Fisher (eds.) The Routledge History of Sex and the Body: 1500 to the Present, (Oxford, 2013) p.48, J. Scheper-Hughes, ‘A Materialist Theory of Religion: The Latin American Frame’, Method and Theory in the Study of Religion, 24, (2012) pp. 430-444.

¹⁰⁸ M. Houlbrook, Queer London: Perils and Pleasures in the sexual metropolis, 1918 -1957, (Chicago, 2005), M. Cook, London and the culture of homosexuality 1885-1914, (Cambridge, 2003) J. Scheper Hughes, ‘A Materialist Theory of Religion’, p. 430.

¹⁰⁹ C. Jones, ‘SHS Conference Plenary Lecture’ (2014), Addressing the conference after Jones’ lecture, the society’s chairman Malcom Chase was to ask whether we were seeing the emergence of a ‘quotidian turn’.

women's contraceptive morality is understood. Historians and commentators in the Catholic birth control debate have all too often overlooked the interdependency of religious experience and meaning.

Catholic beliefs on the body were formed by an interaction between physical, material structures and theological ideologies, both of which, as this chapter has shown, changed and mutated through the course of the twentieth century. As the interviewees moved through their marriages, they increasingly felt the clergy were incapable of relating to the physical, embodied dimensions of marital sexuality. The next section demonstrates how later marriage saw this experiential disparity come to a head, as the moral authority of priests in matters of sex was irreversibly undermined.

The declining authority of the clergy in sexual matters

'I can remember going to the priest at my Parish at the time and saying 'I'm really struggling with this [NFP]. What can we do? And you know what he said? He told me to offer it up! And I remember thinking you have no idea, absolutely no idea what I am talking about. I mean he was sympathetic, but it occurred to me at that moment that he was literally the last person on earth who could relate to what I was going through!'¹¹⁰

'Offering up' physical suffering as a sign of pious devotion was an abiding memory of many of the interviewees' religious education – one recalled being instructed by a sister at her convent 'if you have a headache or something you don't complain, you offer it up to Our Lord, 'suffering is good for you' – but by the middle of the 1960s this form of 'sacrificial spirituality' had largely fallen out of favour.¹¹¹ Paula Kane has shown how this element of Catholicism was taken to an extreme in the cult of the 'Victim Soul', where specific individuals, often women, were 'chosen by God to suffer in order to alleviate the suffering of others and to diminish the effects of sin'.¹¹² As Kane demonstrates, this highly gendered form of ascetic Catholicism remained popular in the 1950s, but fell away dramatically after Vatican II.¹¹³ It is then of little surprise that Patricia was so incredulous at being told to 'offer up' her sexual suffering by her priest in 1979. It epitomised the insularity that lingered in certain strands of the clergy, betraying an imperviousness to developments not only in mainstream secular culture but also within the Catholic community.

¹¹⁰ Patricia, interviewed 03/05/2013.

¹¹¹ Mary, interviewed 11/09/2012.

¹¹² P. M. Kane, "'She Offered Herself Up': The Victim Soul and Victim Spirituality in Catholicism", *Church History* 71, (2002) pp.80-119.

¹¹³ *Ibid*, p.116.

Patricia's testimony was typical in two ways; firstly, the timing of her change in attitude towards the clergy, occurring in later marriage after a prolonged period of using NFP. As we saw was the case for Anne in the last section, a handful of the interviewees had disregarded the authority of their parish priest in the early stages of their marriage. For some this came even earlier - Marian explained that she never had any confidence in priests after the seminarians at her boarding school made the students 'donate' their bacon rations to them during the War.¹¹⁴ For the large majority of the interviewees though, the clergy, much like the teachings of the central Church, remained a respected source of moral and spiritual guidance up until the later phase of their marriage. Secondly, Patricia's testimony was typical in the emphasis she placed on her priest's inability to 'relate to' or understand her sexual experiences. Although the interviewees spoke of a gradual process of questioning steadily eroding their youthful deference, much like Anne's rejection of the contraceptive doctrine, they often recalled a specific moment or instance when their admiration for the clergy crumbled. Teresa recalled hearing a sermon in which the priest blamed the declining rate of vocations to the priesthood on women's 'reluctance to procreate the human race'. A woman in the congregation stood up and left in protest, and Teresa herself was sorely tempted to do the same. She explained that 'it was at that point I realised who these men were. I never held them in the same esteem again, or any esteem really'.¹¹⁵

One of the clearest manifestations of the clergy's weakening moral authority was the dramatic decline in confessional attendance. John Cornwell has argued that the sacrament of confession, a defining feature of Catholic liturgy before the War, had become largely obsolete for a high proportion of Catholics by the late 1970s.¹¹⁶ Many of the interviewees attended confession regularly in their youth and early marriage, but stopped between the ages of forty and sixty. Joan found it impossible to give the priests any credibility – 'I just stopped thinking what they had to say had any relevance to me'.¹¹⁷ If Catholic priests had, by and large, ceased to hold an autocratic, coercive form of power decades, perhaps even centuries earlier, the demise of the confessional in the years after the 1960s represented the dissolution of a more subtle form of authority. They ceased to function as the 'pastor' for Catholic women – a moral shepherd in possession of a privileged, spiritual knowledge. It became clear that the Catholic clergy were among a select few in society who actually lacked a particular kind of knowledge.

Sex was at the centre of Catholic women's rejection of both the confessional and clerical authority in general. Katherine stated that 'Well it was all about sex really. I stopped going

¹¹⁴ Marian, interviewed 26/09/2013.

¹¹⁵ Teresa, interviewed 4/4/2012.

¹¹⁶ J. Cornwell, *The Black Box: A Secret History of Confession*, (London, 2014).

¹¹⁷ Joan, interviewed 10/09/2013.

because I couldn't bear speaking to my priest about that kind of thing!'¹¹⁸ June explained that as her marriage moved on, she felt increasingly 'uncomfortable speaking about sex with those celibate men, very, very uncomfortable. I didn't say to him the things I would say to you.' I asked June why this was and she explained that 'they'd probably be aroused hearing these sort of things. Even from an old woman'.¹¹⁹ The distinction she made between me, an actively heterosexual man, and a priest offers an insight into the widespread mistrust of clerical attitudes to sex that predated even the recent child abuse scandals. The fact that June was happy to divulge intimate details about her sex life to me, and felt assured that I would not be aroused by them, suggested that it was not the priest's gender that was the problem. It could have been my younger age or the academic nature of my interest in the subject that gave me a heightened legitimacy. Either way, celibacy was clearly at the heart of June and many other Catholic women's growing reticence to speak about sex with priests. The decline of the confessional has generally been interpreted as a product of a Vatican II inspired 'liberation', where the moral authority of the clergy was fundamentally challenged by a democratising ideology.¹²⁰ Alongside this story of shifting power dynamics however, the decline of the confessional also spoke of Catholicism's alienation from questions of the body. Transcendent answers were no longer seen to be an appropriate response to what were increasingly thought to be immanent questions of embodied experience.

The fact that priests were entirely bereft of marital sexual experience became increasingly apparent to Catholic women as their own married lives moved on. This was a point that almost all the interviewees repeatedly returned to in the interviews. Before I had even asked my first question, Marian had diagnosed the problem with the priesthood in this way

'The main thing is because they rejected the earthly experience, they grew up in theory. You don't live in theory, theoretically you don't live in theory, and practically you don't.'¹²¹

Many of the interviewees came to our meeting armed with a similar message – the clergy could not possibly understand or hold any moral authority on sex, particularly female sexuality, as they had not experienced it themselves. Indeed, certain priests may have been less ignorant of the experiential nuances of sex than they would have wanted us to believe. Of the twenty six interviewees spoken to, no less than five spoke confidently of knowing parish priests who had had affairs with parishioners, with several others alluding to similar rumours that they could not

¹¹⁸ Katherine, interviewed 14/07/2013.

¹¹⁹ June, interviewed 20/02/2013.

¹²⁰ M. Hornsby-Smith, *Roman Catholic Beliefs in England*, pp.61-62.

¹²¹ Marian, interviewed 26/09/2013.

confirm to be true.¹²² These stories were rarely recounted with anger or outrage, but rather a sense of exasperated pity. Celibacy was viewed as an ‘unnatural’ state which both attracted and generated moral deviancy.

While parish priests at a grassroots level gradually lost their position of pastoral authority in Catholic women’s lives, the central hierarchy was to see an even more dramatic fall from grace. For many of the interviewees, their ‘frustration’ and ‘exasperation’ with the hierarchy turned to ‘anger’ and ‘disdain’ in later marriage –

‘Weak old men! All men! I agreed for a long time but when I saw the coronation of the Pope, this last pope [Pope Benedict XVI] on television, the serried ranks of old men, almost all white, I just If you go to weekday mass you hardly see a man, it’s the women who do things.’¹²³

Alongside the preponderant issue of gender, there was also a sense that the central hierarchy was even more removed from the daily experiences of Catholic couples than the local parish priests. Lynn pointed out that –

‘They are locked away in their ivory towers in the Vatican, they don’t know anything about the Catholic people. They are so removed from normal existence; they couldn’t begin to understand things like sex. At least the parish priests are there, on the ground level, meeting and talking to the laity everyday’.¹²⁴

By later marriage, the experiential distance between Catholic women and the celibate, clerical officials of the Holy See had become abundantly apparent and prompted many of the interviewees to reject the Church’s moral authority outright.

Certain Catholic authorities of the time, and still today, have contended that it is not necessary to have lived through a particular experience to be able to take a position, or indeed act as a source of guidance, on it.¹²⁵ This apriorism was the epistemological precept on which religious authority in sexual matters had been based for centuries. However, as we saw in the last chapter, this idea was being challenged inside the walls of the Vatican in the 1960s. The very existence of the Papal Commission for Birth Control indicated that the Catholic hierarchy was acknowledging new, extrinsic sources of sexual knowledge. *Humanae Vitae* was therefore interpreted as a rejection of not only Catholic women’s bodily autonomy, but also the value of their lived experience. This latter indictment became increasingly apparent to Catholic women

¹²² It should be acknowledged that this proportion reflects the fact that the sample was made up of individuals who tended to be very involved in parish communities and Church organisations.

¹²³ Teresa, interviewed 4/4/2012.

¹²⁴ Lynn, interviewed 12/4/2012.

¹²⁵ For example, this principle was the basis of Fr. Ford and Dr Grisez’s minority report to the Pope.

as their marriages moved on; it was something that took the time and space of later marriage to fully crystallise. When it did, their form of Catholic devotion would never be the same again.

Conclusion

Academic studies of female sexuality tend to devote more attention to younger than older women.¹²⁶ Callum Brown's work focused on 'young women caught in the throngs of a sexual revolution', while the sociological investigations of The Papal Commission for Birth Control also showed little interest in married women beyond their mid-thirties.¹²⁷ Numerous reasons for this heightened interest in early as opposed to later female sexuality could be suggested – it speaks of the 'male gaze' that continues to frame intellectual assessments of femininity as well as the persistence of fertility as the primary determinant of women's sexual function. Even when the experiences of older married women have gained attention, marriage has been treated as a single homogenous life-cycle stage. The interviewees' memories show that the sexual experiences of Catholic women in post-war England were defined by a clear and distinct break. It was 'later marriage' that witnessed transformatory changes in their religious beliefs, sexual behaviour and sense of identity. Acknowledging this break provides the foundations for a fuller picture of the 'personal' when considering Catholic women's sexual experiences.

This chapter has therefore contributed towards the main conclusions of the thesis in two ways. Firstly, it has shown the centrality of later marriage to the formation of Catholic women's 'liberal' religious identities. It was a life-cycle stage where the clerical hierarchy's authority in sexual matters, particularly contraceptive morality, was irreversibly broken. The direction of causation between experience and authority is vitally important. The authority of the clergy was not simply undermined by a Vatican II inspired ideology of democratisation, but also by the experiences that Catholic women lived through in their early married life. Changes in Catholic power dynamics were driven by physical, embodied experiences rather than being directed by intellectual and theological elites. Secondly, it has demonstrated how these 'liberal' Catholic identities were forged through an active re-categorisation of the religious and the sexual. It was often not until after the end of the 1960s that the ontological separation between these two domains of knowledge, described in the previous chapters, took hold in the personal theologies and everyday experiences of Catholic women. The next chapter delves back into Catholic women's early marriage, uncovering the emotional and embodied sensibilities which induced these moments of personal transformation.

¹²⁶ This tendency provided the motivation for Pat Thane's research, P. Thane and L. Bothelo, Women and Ageing in British Society Since 1500, (Oxford, 2001).

¹²⁷ Brown, C, 'Sex, Religion, and the Single Woman c.1950–75: The Importance of a 'Short' Sexual Revolution to the English Religious Crisis of the Sixties', Journal of Social History, 22, (2011) pp.189- 215.

Chapter 4

Sexuality in early marriage

We first met June in the previous chapter; we saw how it was not until her early forties that her marriage went ‘off the rails’, as she became aware of her and her husband’s ‘sexual incompatibility’ and had an affair. The following excerpt from our interview offers some insight into the sexual difficulties that June encountered in her early marriage, while also introducing a number of the key themes this chapter addresses -

DG – Do you want to talk about your experience of using Natural Family Planning?

June - Right, disastrous. In fact, this is very personal - when I went to the hospital, when I thought I was expecting Matthew two months after we were married, I was examined and I was still a virgin, so that shows how efficient we were at sex. So a second virgin birth! And the consultant deflowered me I think is a polite way of putting it, without asking my permission!

DG – (pause) Can I ask how that happened, you conceived Matthew ...

June -Well you have a little hole, when you’re menstruating you have a little gap, don’t you, in the hymen I suppose it is, my husband must have had very strong spermatozoa as he managed to make me pregnant through the hole.

DG – Without coitus...

June - Well we had coitus but I don’t suppose he went in very far, I mean we were so ignorant in those days, we’ve written to each other since and apologised for the mess we made of each other’s life and you know he said we just didn’t know what we were doing and the Church was such a hindrance we couldn’t experiment, it was just so rigid.’¹

The revelation of a second ‘immaculate conception’ was certainly unexpected, which goes some way to explaining my failure to pick up on June’s unsettling disclosure that her consultant ‘deflowered’ her without permission. It is a regret that I did not think to ask about this at the time, but it was also clear that June did not see this as the main point of her story.

¹ It should be noted that I generally used the term ‘sex’ in the interviews rather than ‘coitus’. This was June’s term and so I ended up adopting it here. June, interviewed 20/02/2013.

June's recollections serve as a particularly poignant entry point to this chapter on early marriage for two reasons. Firstly, the acute ignorance of sexual anatomy that marred her first sexual encounter was an increasingly rare phenomenon amongst young Catholic couples in 1960s Britain. This was, in part, a consequence of wider societal shifts in sexual culture, including a 'democratisation' of sexual knowledge described by the likes of Lesley Hall and Roy Porter, but also a direct response to the rapid expansion of specifically Catholic marriage preparation initiatives.² Although the Catholic Marriage Advisory Council (CMAC) was founded in 1946, it remained, in the words of marriage guidance historian Jane Lewis, a 'small and rather closed organisation' until the early 1960s when it rapidly transformed into a professional, internationally recognised organisation.³ Alongside the CMAC's advances, a number of sex manuals specifically aimed at Catholics were produced in the early 1960s that offered frank and detailed guidance on the biological mechanics of sex. Preparing For Marriage (1962) included a chapter on 'First Times' that would have proved particularly useful to June and her husband.⁴ June was one of only six respondents not to have consulted any form of sexual guidance before her marriage, a fact that reflected both her geographical location (June was from a small town in the North of England and the mainstay of the CMAC's centres were still concentrated in London and the South East) as well as her wariness of the distinctly middle class character of its counsellors and clients. This chapter begins by examining how Catholic sexual instruction emerged as a distinct field of expert knowledge in the post-war decades, extending its reach to almost all sections of the Catholic community. It assesses the understanding of female sexuality that was constructed by these experts and the effect this had on Catholic women's marital experiences.

Secondly, June's response epitomised the way that many of the interviewees conflated the Church's teaching on contraceptive morality with its wider approach to sex. My question was about her experience of practising NFP, but her response almost immediately turned to her own sexual naivety and the Church's culpability for this. She did not start to practice NFP until after the birth of her third child over five years after this incident. The interviewees' overriding memory of early marriage was of their sexual interests being denied or frustrated by their Catholic beliefs in one way or another. We have seen that for many of the interviewees, later marriage witnessed a moment of 'liberation' or 'enlightenment' in which their religious beliefs on sexual behaviour, notably contraception, were permanently disrupted. They emphasised that this moment was driven by years of physical and emotional struggle rather than being brought about by an emancipatory ideology. The second section of this chapter explores these years of

² R. Porter and L. Hall, The Facts of Life: The creation of sexual knowledge in Britain, (Yale, 1995).

³ J. Lewis, 'Private counselling versus public voice, 1948 – 68', in J. Lewis, D. Clark and D. Morgan (eds.), Whom God Hath Joined Together, The Work of Marriage Guidance, (London, 1992) p.74.

⁴ J. Marshall, Preparing For Marriage (Baltimore, 1962).

struggle, using the interviewees' testimony alongside contemporary source material to reconstruct Catholics women's everyday experience of using NFP.

Almost all the interviewees spoke of early marriage as a period that was typified by the 'busyness' and 'constant activity' of raising a young family. For the purposes of this chapter, 'early marriage' is defined as the years between engagement and the end of childrearing. Again, as with later marriage, the timings of this life-cycle stage varied from person to person and shifted over time. All but two had not had sex before they were wed, a proportion that, if Michael Schofield's survey data is to be believed, was not as far out of kilter with the rest of society as might have been thought.⁵

The interviewees' memories of early marriage were defined by a tension between the physical, bodily concerns of sexuality and the transcendent, ethereal domain of religious beliefs. Amidst the daily pressures that this schism exerted on the interviewees, they did not forgo their faith or relationships, but pursued creative 'tactics' that allowed them to negotiate these dissonant demands. It was out of these tactics that they eventually reformulated their religious identities and realised their full 'selves'. If later marriage saw the 'culmination' or 'realisation' of a process of separation between the religious and the sexual, then it was the everyday experiences of early marriage that set this process in motion.

The final section of the chapter focuses on my own attempt to pursue a reciprocal relationship between religious and sexual sensibilities in the interviews. Pleasurable experiences in early marriage were spoken of fleetingly but did exist— what I was interested in was how these experiences informed the interviewees' religious beliefs. Did sexual pleasure affirm their belief in a Catholic God? Did their beliefs shape or even augment their physical sensations? Responses to these questions were extremely brief and yet generally affirmative. This final section reflects on why this was the case, evaluating a range of potential explanations for the interviewees' lack of articulation on the topic. Ultimately, the chapter argues that a conceptual separation between the sexual and the religious took hold in the post-war decades and continues to frame the language through which the two are conceptualised. Rather than simply being defined by binaries of repression/liberation and authority/autonomy, I suggest that this separation worked along deeper, meta-physical lines.

Catholic marriage preparation

The interviewees were of a generation whose sex lives were subjected to an unparalleled level of attention from Church institutions. Foucauldian scholars would claim that the Catholic

⁵ M. Schofield, *The Sexual Behaviour of Young People*, (London, 1965), pp. 148–9, 216, 254.

Church had always policed sexuality through the clerical gaze of the confessional, but it had never provided much in the way of formalised pre-marital instruction.⁶ The very concept of ‘marriage preparation’ had not featured in Catholic thinking before the War and was still unfamiliar to much of the laity by the early 1960s - the first chapter of the 1962 marriage guidance manual Preparing For Marriage is titled ‘Why Prepare?’ and reads

‘The first question many people ask when preparation for marriage is mentioned is, Why prepare? They declare that their parents and grandparents did not have books or attend courses for engaged couples, yet they did very well for themselves and their families.’⁷

The manual pointed out that -

‘Marriage today is more difficult a venture than it was in times past... Marriage is a natural state, but the complexities of modern society are such that our natural instincts and intuitions are not enough to guide us. We need to learn how to meet the demands of contemporary life, without despoiling real values, or interfering with our true nature.’⁸

We can see how a traditional Catholic rhetoric of the ‘natural’, articulated here through phrases like ‘natural instincts’ and ‘our true nature’, remained an important aspect of the way marriage preparation was marketed. The quote also indicates how Catholic authorities were becoming increasingly concerned that the ‘complexities of modern society’ were making marriage, and particularly sexuality, an area that required renewed attentions. Throughout the 1960s, this awareness of a new, ‘modern’ understanding of sexuality was a conspicuous presence in the rhetoric of Catholic marriage guidance experts, Papal Commission members and even the Pope himself.

The most pointed expression of this concern can be seen in the CMAC’s rapid expansion in the 1960s. At its initiation in the mid-1940s, the CMAC offered private counselling for couples and was largely confined to the London area. By 1968 it had moved into sex therapy services, education and medical work with 59 centres across Britain. Its most popular service was the Preparing Engaged Couples for Marriage course which provided Catholic couples with information and guidance on a range of aspects of marriage, with a particular focus on sexual matters. The course marked a major reorientation in the Church’s approach to sexual instruction – the central hierarchy had previously made it clear that the only individuals in a position to advise married couples on questions of sex and family planning were members of the clergy, in consultation with a doctor if necessary. A 1951 memorandum to the CMAC’s counsellors

⁶ C. Taylor, The culture of the confession from Augustine to Foucault, (New York, 2009).

⁷ J. Marshall, Preparing For Marriage (Baltimore, 1962).

⁸ Ibid.

confirmed the circumscribed nature of their role; they were to give information about Natural Family Planning (which had been first endorsed by the Pope in an address to midwives earlier that year) but never to advise on whether or not to actually use the method.⁹ The CMAC training manual Preparing Engaged Couples for Marriage (PECFM) indicates that by the mid-1960s counsellors were being fully entrusted with the responsibility for directing Catholic couples' contraceptive choices and sexual behaviour.¹⁰

This extension of counsellors' jurisdiction coincided with a shift in clerical attitudes towards the CMAC. In an interview with ex-CMAC chairman John Marshall, he pointed out that in the 1950s parish priests remained generally sceptical of marriage guidance in principle, opposing the very idea that married love could be 'taught' or 'counselled'.¹¹ The Catholic clergy's widespread acceptance and promotion of the CMAC's work in the early 1960s represented a reversal in clerical attitudes towards both lay participation and the very concept of marriage guidance. Support for the CMAC amongst the English clergy was such that an annual training conference was set up to inform parish priests of the CMAC's services and to educate them in the latest approaches to sexual instruction. The first, in 1960, was attended by 188 priests; by 1964 there were over 400.¹² Just as Jane Lewis has shown to be the case for secular institutions during the 1960s, the Church recognised sex to be a legitimate site for expert intervention, a subject that could be taught and learnt, studied and understood.¹³

In the following three sub-sections, the CMAC's internal correspondences and counsellor training manuals are used alongside the interviewees' recollections to explore the relationship between prescription and practice. Twenty of the twenty-six interviewees used the CMAC's services at one point in their married lives. However, many found the advice that they received in their early marriage lacking in some way. For a handful of 'liberals', this was simply a consequence of the organisation's need to 'toe the party line' when it came to birth control. But as other interviewees pointed out, clients were generally aware that this would be the case before they visited the CMAC. In keeping with the wider intellectual climate of the 1960s, the CMAC's guidance on sexual behaviour was rigorously scientific, but the interviewees found that it paid little attention to the emotional and spiritual aspects of married love. In this sense, the CMAC's construction of female sexuality shared many similarities with that of the Papal Commission. Representatives of both groups neglected the personal, intimate aspects of sexual

⁹ Decisions Reached on Preparation for Marriage and pre-marriage advice to be given by counsellors, (11th April 1951), Marriage Care Papers. More information on what Natural Family Planning involved is given in the next section. The Pope's endorsement of NFP was given at addresses of October 29, 1951 to the Italian Catholic Union of midwives and November 26 to the National Congress of the Family Front and the Association of Large Families, National Catholic Welfare Conference, Washington, DC.

¹⁰ Catholic Marriage Advisory Council, Preparing Engaged Couples for Marriage, (London, 1967).

¹¹ J. Marshall, interviewed 12/5/2011.

¹² Marriage Care, p.25.

¹³ J. Lewis, 'Private counselling versus public voice, 1948 – 68', in J. Lewis, D. Clark and D. Morgan (eds.), Whom God Hath Joined Together: The Work of Marriage Guidance, (London, 1992) p.118.

experience in their efforts to engage with ‘modern’ notions of healthy sexual expression. Underpinning this failing was an implicit separation between the religious and the sexual, with the sexual defined as something immanently biological and the religious as a transcendental matter removed from the body’s earthly mechanics.

A Catholic sexual knowledge

The CMAC valued sexual knowledge as more than just a helpful aid to engaged couples, but as a necessary prerequisite for successful marital relations. A section in PECFM was devoted to explaining the different ways in which men and women achieve orgasm, stressing the importance of specific sexual ‘knowledge’ –

‘If one wants to give happiness to one’s partner in marriage it is necessary that one should know something about the essential details. Good intentions are not enough, one must have sound knowledge’¹⁴

The point that ‘good intentions are not enough’ suggests that it was the marital duty of each member of the couple to ‘give happiness to one’s partner’. This indicates that the CMAC had a firm idea of what constituted good or healthy sex, a target that could only be realised through the correct knowledge of the human body.

The CMAC went beyond this in its genuflection to a modern body of sexual expertise. It became apparent that engaged Catholic couples were often more concerned with receiving sexual advice than any other aspect of the eight week marriage preparation course; counsellors Quentin de la Bedoyere and his wife Irene would end their seminars explaining that the following week might be dealing with ‘sex and religion’ but they might also be looking at ‘finance in marriage’ so as to ensure full attendance for both. Despite Quentin and Irene’s best efforts, reports from the decade indicate that the attendance for the ‘Sex in Marriage’ seminar far outstripped that for any other class.¹⁵ The CMAC responded to the Catholic community’s growing demand for sexual guidance by introducing specialist ‘sex therapy counsellors’ to augment its existing personnel. These individuals were specifically trained for dealing with ‘sexual difficulties’, a move that was believed to be a direct response to the publication of Masters and Johnson’s research in 1966.¹⁶ John Marshall explains that their specialist status was largely derived from their medical training and that couples often found the regular CMAC

¹⁴ CMAC, Preparing Engaged Couples, p.60.

¹⁵ ‘Attendance’, File Reports 1960-1969, Marriage Care Archive.

¹⁶ Marshall, Marriage Care, p.33, J. Marshall, interviewed 12/5/2011.

counsellors equally, if not more adept at dealing with questions of intimacy.¹⁷ In 1972, the sex therapy counsellors were phased out by the CMAC on the basis that the regular counsellors' 'human approach' could adequately cater for the emotional issues that were being raised. This zeal to acknowledge sexuality as its own field of knowledge, requiring its own form of expertise, represented a persistent feature of the way Catholic authorities approached the changing status of sex in the 1960s. In bringing in and training specific sex therapy counsellors, the CMAC marked out sexual problems as an area of marriage that demanded special attention.

Although the CMAC favoured the non-directive approach to counsellor training that had been developed in the UK by the secular author John Wallis, it actively encouraged a particular way of talking about sex. It is apparent from PECFM that much thought had gone into the way in which sexual knowledge should be imparted by CMAC representatives.¹⁸ Headings like Language, Style, Jokes, Use of Drawings and Common Mistakes were all separately addressed in the textbook that outlined the desired approach to discussing sex.¹⁹ The use of humour represented an important facet of a counsellor's presentational style. In a section devoted to jokes, the manual read:

'Mild witticisms to ease the tension with laughter are essential, set piece jokes tend to fall flat and belly laughs should be avoided; both tend to emphasise rather than diminish embarrassment'²⁰

The use of light comedy to ease tension and create a comfortable environment in which to discuss sex represented a popular technique for corresponding secular agencies. Alex Comfort's The Joy of Sex first published in 1972 pointed out that

'The amount of laughter you have [when talking about sex], is evidence for, not against the seriousness of your communication. If you have this, the laughs never fail, because sex is funny.'²¹

Gentle humour served to acknowledge the stigma that still surrounded sex in the 1960s, particularly within the Catholic community, and ensured that sexual issues were not blown out of proportion by the counsellors or couples. It should be noted that this approach was the product of conscious and considered directives from within the CMAC rather than being left to

¹⁷ J. Marshall, interviewed 12/5/2011.

¹⁸ Catholic Marriage Advisory Council, Preparing Engaged Couples for Marriage, (London, 1967).

¹⁹ CMAC, Preparing Engaged Couples, pp.53-55.

²⁰ CMAC, Preparing Engaged Couples, p.54.

²¹ A. Comfort, The Joy of Sex, (California, 2002 edition) p.191.

the counsellor's discretion. The section devoted to 'Jokes' spent over two pages outlining the appropriate use and misuse of humour when dealing with sexual subjects. These attentive guidelines contradicted the CMAC's commitment to a non-directive form of counsellor training. As the CMAC's Director Fr. Maurice O'Leary acknowledged, at times it could prove difficult to reconcile this non-directive approach with the rigid set of moral principles set out by Catholic doctrine. The CMAC's counsellors were afforded a high level of autonomy in almost all aspects of their counselling, but sex remained a topic that was closely governed.

The CMAC's understanding of female sexual pleasure

Just as the Papal Commission's discussion of female sexuality involved a reversal in the central hierarchy's approach to Freud, so the CMAC's work in the 1960s represented a similar turnabout for distributors of Catholic sexual advice. Marriage guidance provided by Catholic authorities before the 1960s tended to be sceptical, if not downright hostile towards psychoanalysis. A collection of frequently asked questions for Catholic couples, first broadcast on radio by Frs Rumble and Carty and then published in a booklet, set out the 'Church's' opinion of Freud in 1938 -

'As a system, Freudian psychoanalysis must be rejected as false and most pernicious... Psycho-analysts have fallen into absurd exaggerations, and their pretence to furnish a new basis for all human activities in art, education, morality and religion must be utterly rejected. Most loathsome is his over-emphasis of sex.'²²

And of Freudian approaches to psychotherapy –

'Even as a therapeutic treatment of neurosis psychoanalysis is dangerous. The discovery of the harmful element in psychic life does not mean the cure. Often a complete re-education of the patient is necessary. The Catholic confessional has all that is good in psychoanalysis, but with safeguards unknown in this pretended new science.'²³

Two decades later, it was apparent that official Catholic marital 'experts' had completely reversed their attitudes to psychotherapy and Freud in particular. CMAC counsellor Quentin de la Bedoyere described his training in the early 1960s as 'highly Freudian' and the guidance in counsellor training manuals was grounded in a distinctly psychotherapeutic vocabulary.²⁴ As the Freudian school became widely critiqued in psychological circles in the early 1970s, so the

²² Frs Rumble & Carty, Radio Replies by Frs Rumble & Carty, (USA, 1938) p. 261.

²³ Rumble & Carty, Radio Replies, p.263.

²⁴ Q. de la Bedoyere, interviewed 20/6/2011.

CMAC replaced this approach with the ‘skilled helper system’ and looked to the more accommodating framework provided by Jungian theory. The 1960s were though a peculiar point of union between Freud’s understanding of human nature and the sexual discourses of Catholic authorities.

The subject of the female orgasm was addressed directly and rigorously within CMAC seminars. Appendix B shows the graph that counsellors were encouraged to use to illustrate the different sexual responses of men and women. The paragraph below detailed the ‘problems’ that could come about if a woman did not reach orgasm –

‘She will be left in a state of suspended animation having been roused to a certain extent but not satisfied. If this state of affairs occurs as a regular feature of marriage it can be detrimental to both physical and psychological health. What is to be done about it? Obviously the man must be slowed down and the woman speeded up until the two coincide’²⁵

Sexual pleasure was considered to be a constitutive aspect of a woman’s well-being, a well-being articulated in terms of ‘physical’ and ‘psychological’ health. Counsellors instructed married couples on techniques to ensure the correct mood was created for intercourse, offering advice on ‘Settings’, ‘Timing’ and ‘Foreplay’. They were also trained to encourage the husband to ‘prolong’ intercourse so as to achieve the ultimate objective of the mutual climax. Although there was no explicit distinction made between a clitoral and vaginal orgasm, it was stressed that caressing of the clitoris was ‘perfectly right and normal in proper marriage’. The clitoris was described as a ‘very important organ’ and information on the ‘Stimulation of the Clitoris’ was detailed under the heading ‘Intercourse’ rather than ‘Foreplay’.²⁶ The CMAC’s counsellors were trained to provide candid and frank instructions for achieving the female orgasm as if it were nothing less than a biological certainty.

The CMAC actually placed more of an emphasis on the importance of women’s ‘sexual response’ than corresponding secular agencies in the 1960s, with a National Marriage Guidance Council training manual informing counsellors not to ‘get caught up with questions of the female orgasm, this is ... specific to individual women and can often become a point of obsession rather than fulfilment.’²⁷ The NGMC’s approach reflected an increasing awareness that some women were feeling guilty for not achieving orgasm, as well as a sensitivity around its own lack of scientific expertise. In comparison, the CMAC’s approach chimed with a notion

²⁵ CMAC, Preparing Engaged Couples, p.61.

²⁶ Ibid, p.64.

²⁷ NMGC, Marriage Guidance, p.16.

of marital ‘mutuality’ that was more in vogue at the start of the century. Robert Irwin among others has shown that the call for an erosion of sexual ignorance, a preoccupation with sexual technique (notably the man being slowed down so as to achieve female satisfaction) and the valorisation of the mutual orgasm were all being promoted by various sexual authorities in the first half of the twentieth century. For Irwin, this form of mutuality was ushered in by the influence of first-wave feminism, second-wave sexology and the trauma of the First World War.²⁸ In this sense, the CMAC was over a generation behind early sexologists such as Marie Stopes in its discussion of the female orgasm, but the very fact that the topic represented a legitimate area of discussion for a Catholic institution should be viewed in the context of the Church’s longstanding silence on the subject. PECFM showed a meticulous, almost fastidious commitment to redressing the Church’s previous ambivalence towards the libidinal interests of married women.

The CMAC was eager to employ scientific modes of communication wherever it could – the graph in Appendix B not only functioned as a useful visual aid for the counsellors, but provided a sense of authority on sexual matters that drew from its seemingly empirical basis. The PECFM seminar on Sex in Marriage began with the group labelling a diagram of the human body, an exercise that ensured all the participants had a certain level of knowledge of human anatomy, but also served to establish the terminology that would be used throughout the seminar. As we shall see in the following chapter, the necessity of this exercise was, to some extent, an indication of the limited nature of sexual education provided in Catholic schools during the 1940s and 1950s. PECFM comprehensively listed the terms that should be used when discussing bodily parts, explaining that

‘Scientific terms that lay people are going to meet should always be used, but bracketed with the vernacular equivalent only when appropriate. Thus ‘womb-or-uterus’ is used as one word every time that organ is referred to – qualifying phrases like ‘the womb or as we call it the uterus’ serves only to exasperate the informed and patronise the ignorant.’²⁹

In this way, medical terminology was actively encouraged as the principal language with which to discuss marital sexuality. Even the way PECFM’s narrative was structured mirrored the scientific process, with each chapter divided into sections titled ‘Aims’, ‘Method’ and ‘Summary’. The CMAC’s approach to marital sexuality demonstrated a reverence for the

²⁸ R. Irwin, ‘To try and find out what is being done to whom, by whom and with what results’: the creation of psychosexual counselling policy in England, 1972-1979’, Twentieth Century British History, 20, (2009) p.176.

²⁹ CMAC, Preparing Engaged Couples, p.53.

scientific, borrowing liberally from the vocabulary and methodological apparatus of the medical sciences.

While scientific discourses provided the principal resource that the CMAC drew on in its communication of sexual advice, there were certain tensions when counsellors attempted to integrate the ‘spiritual’ language of Catholic teachings into this narrative. For example, consider the description of sexual intercourse outlined in PECFM -

‘What happens to the woman at this time? The glands around the entrance to the vagina secrete an oily substance for the purpose of making intercourse easy. The clitoris should become full to a certain extent. This is accompanied by pleasing and joyous sensations which God has attached to the act of intercourse as an incentive and reward to man and woman for joining him in their expression of love and in being with Him co-creators of children for this world and the next. At about the time the man reaches his climax the woman too should reach a climax.’³⁰

The spiritual aspect of married love was dealt with exclusively in the fourth sentence, clearly distinguishing it from the medical descriptions of the body’s processes. The colloquial tone that was encouraged throughout PECFM was dropped at the end of this sentence, with the phrase ‘this world and the next’ seemingly lifted directly from a liturgical prayer. The sentence structure also set it apart from the rest of the passage; when describing the sexual act the sentences were short and to the point, whereas the fourth line was lengthy and long-winded in its description of sex’s celestial virtues. This tension between the medical language used for sexual instruction and the spiritual discourses required to communicate Catholic teachings on marital love represented a recurrent motif in PECFM’s narrative. As we shall see, this tension did not escape the attentions of the CMAC’s clients.

Catholic women’s opinion of the CMAC’s advice

After sharing some of my initial research with one of the interviewees, she commented that she ‘remembered well’ being presented with the graph from PECFM in her marriage preparation seminar almost fifty years ago. In a written correspondence between us, Veronica recalled that -

³⁰ The ‘joyous sensations’ are ‘attached’ to the sexual act, suggesting sex was essentially a procreative act to which pleasure was appended. This understanding of sex was consistently upheld by the Church right up until Humanae Vitae when the ‘hierarchy of values’ reversed this order. Arguments about the ‘primary’ and ‘secondary’ function of sex – the ordering of procreation and pleasure - was central to the Catholic birth control debate in the 1960s. As stated on page 37, this thesis is not interested in rehashing the well-trodden, theological binaries of these contests. I am more interested into how these dichotomies mapped on to a deeper, ontological process of categorisation. CMAC, Preparing Engaged Couples, p.60.

‘A woman said – ‘couldn’t she just act up?’ From the men including the speaker came a wave of ‘no no, honestly, nothing false, openness in marriage’ and the discussion veered from the issue. Later in the ladies cloakroom the assembled women burst out laughing in support of the person who had suggested acting up. Do you not think there has to be some mystery between men and women?’³¹

Veronica’s recollections provide an insight into the way the CMAC’s rigorously empirical understanding of ‘sexual response’ did not always correlate with the performative dynamics and gendered expectations that shaped marital relations. In my response to Veronica, I told her that her anecdote reminded me of a scene from the recently aired TV series Masters of Sex (2013). Purporting to be based on ‘real events’, the drama series depicted the work of the pioneering sex researchers William Masters and Virginia Johnson in the late 1950s. In this particular scene, the eminent sexual scientist Dr. Masters was baffled by the revelation that a woman had simulated her orgasm – he simply could not understand why she would ever want to do this.³² Both instances seemed to perfectly encapsulate how the empiricism of mid-century sexual science was intimately tied up with an almost exclusively masculinist perspective on the body. The valorisation of the ‘mutual orgasm’ drove women to ‘act up’ which in turn denied them their own physical pleasure, so I concluded. However, in her reply Veronica shared with me the slightly different meaning she took from her story-

‘But I had in mind a different scene: instead of saying oh, you’re home rather early, she says hi, here’s your welcome home hug.’³³

My own interpretation had emphasised the wife’s physical frustration at not being satisfied, but Veronica had taken a more optimistic reading of ‘acting up’. She viewed it more as a means of loving cooperation rather than deception. It appears I equally displayed the tendency of male intellectual investigators of female sexuality to focus on ‘the orgasm’ and physical response rather than the complex interpersonal dynamics of married love. The interviewees’ memories shine a light on the intimate negotiations that went on in Catholic marital bedrooms, negotiations for which the CMAC and my own initial questioning made little provision.

While the interviewees’ evaluations of the CMAC’s sexual advice were often determined by existing views of the Church’s teaching on birth control, there was a comment common to both ‘liberal’ and ‘orthodox’ women. ‘Doreen’ described the CMAC’s seminars as ‘very, very anatomical’, while ‘Katherine’ recalled that ‘It was all extremely clinical. It [sex] was

³¹ Correspondence with Veronica, 15/09/2013.

³² Masters of Sex, Series 1, Showtime (2013).

³³ Correspondence with Veronica, 15/09/2013. The written nature of this source should be taken into account when considering Veronica’s position. She had more time and to ‘compose’ her response than would have been the case for the interviewees. This would account for the fluidity of expression, but could also be seen to direct the meaning of her reflections.

something to learn from a textbook, like a school for love'.³⁴ Another Catholic woman recalled that she was eager to gain an insight into the sexual act, but the CMAC's detached and somewhat impersonal form of sexual guidance was epitomised by the fact that her own parents were counsellors - 'I mean, talk about a difference between the rhetoric and the reality!'.³⁵ It seems the positive and emotional aspects of sex were communicated in a diagnostic language that neglected something of the spiritual for these Catholic women.

The CMAC's failure to recognise the fullness of women's sexual experience could be placed in a continuum with the Church's traditional indifference, perhaps even opposition to female sexual expression. Elements of this tradition lingered in the CMAC throughout the post-war decades. June recalled finding sex very painful in her early marriage, especially when her husband would first enter her. When she visited a CMAC counsellor to ask for help in the early 1970s, she was informed that she should use KY Jelly to 'ease entry'.³⁶ This particular counsellor's advice seemed to suggest that a woman's role in sex was primarily about satisfying male or procreative interests (or at least this was how June interpreted it), reflecting an understanding of sex which had dominated Catholic thinking up until the War. However, it would be misleading to present this as an overriding feature of the CMAC's working beyond the 1960s. Episodes like that cited by June were extremely sparse in the interviews, and the counsellor's advice in this instance directly contravened the training the counsellors were receiving. As Alana Harris has pointed out, the majority of the counsellors were themselves women, a real oddity for an imprimated Church institution.³⁷

At the heart of the CMAC's shortcomings was less a straightforward issue of gender as it had been for Church representatives in the first half of the century - when women were often deemed underserving of or irrelevant to sexual fulfilment per se - and more a matter of how women's sexual fulfilment was constructed. In their zeal to present frank and scientific sexual guidance, the CMAC's counsellors overlooked the emotional and spiritual aspects of married love. Sex had become considered a matter of empirical 'truth', a rendering which Foucault has identified as a key feature of a distinctly 'modern' understanding of sex. The CMAC's understanding of female sexuality, much like that of the Papal Commission for birth control, was therefore a product of its wider historical environment. The question Marie posed at the end of our correspondence illuminates an important dimension of this environment - 'Do you not think there has to be some mystery between men and women?'.³⁸ Veronica may have been

³⁴ Doreen, interviewed 11/08/2012, Katherine, interviewed 3/5/2012.

³⁵ Teresa, interviewed 04/04/2012.

³⁶ June, interviewed 20/02/2013.

³⁷ A. Harris, 'Love Divine and Love Sublime: The Catholic Marriage Advisory Council, the Marriage Guidance Movement and the State' in A. Harris and T. West (eds.) *Love and Romance in Britain, 1918-1970*, (New York, 2015) pp.188-244.

³⁸ Correspondence with Veronica, 15/09/2013.

referring to a specific situation of marital communication, but the observation that underpinned her question resonated profoundly with the themes of this thesis. The understanding of sexuality that the CMAC and Catholic authorities more broadly constructed in the 1960s worked to deny the mysteries of sex. In a late-modern context, a widespread distrust of the enigmatic, the peculiar and the unspoken developed in dominant approaches to sexuality, and served to sever sex from its transcendental potential.

The next section moves forward from the marriage preparation which Catholic women received to look at their contraceptive behaviour during early marriage. Particular attention is paid to the emotional sensibilities that were bound up with these decisions and practices. Retrospective oral testimony holds an unparalleled capacity to uncover these often overlooked sensibilities, underlining the poverty but also historical specificity of the CMAC's highly clinical approach to subject.

Contraceptive practice and morality

From 1951 when the method was approved by the Pope, up until the mid-1980s when it began to significantly wane in popularity, a large proportion of Britain's Catholic population were to practice Natural Family Planning at some point in their marriage.³⁹ It was a distinctly post-war marital experience that spoke of Catholicism's complex and sometimes fractured relationship with modernity. The heavy use of scientific apparatus and concern for the economics of the family showed an unprecedented engagement with secular thinking, while the renewed devotion to the 'natural' and the almost ascetic demands made on the body seemed increasingly anachronistic to many outside observers. Catholic couples everyday, or more accurately every night, experience of practising NFP therefore represents a critical point of enquiry for this thesis. It embodied Catholic women's daily negotiation of the spiritual and the sexual, the moral and the material at a time when these categories were themselves blurring and disintegrating.

Alongside the testimony of the interviewees, the following section draws on a collection of letters sent to John Marshall in his capacity as a CMAC medical officer and author of guidance manuals on the method. Over a period of 40 years, he corresponded with over 10,000 individuals. The private correspondences offer a unique window into contemporary opinions of the method and allow us to measure these against the interviewees' present-day recollections. A selection of the correspondences was published in a small book in 1995.⁴⁰ Marshall, writing as a medical authority and hailing from a background in neurological research, prided himself on

³⁹ G. Jones and D. Nortman, 'Roman Catholic fertility and family planning: A Comparative Review of the Research Literature', *Studies in Family Planning*, 34, (1968), pp. 1-72.

⁴⁰ J. Marshall, *Love One Another: Psychological Aspects of Natural Family Planning*, (London, 1995).

taking a 'scientific approach' that allowed the statements 'to speak for themselves'.⁴¹ His accompanying commentary did little more than summarise the points made. As one reviewer stated, it was 'written with empathy and compassion but without question or judgement'.⁴² While the statements are still presented here as they were first written, my 'historical approach' makes no claims to be 'scientific'. Furthermore, it is a historical approach which acknowledges and even celebrates the 'question and judgement', selections and interpretations that are brought to bear on the material. The differing frameworks within which my grandfather and I place these statements is a testament to our divergent disciplinary backgrounds, but also to the wider historical setting within which these backgrounds were formed. A valorisation of the empirically scientific and a positivist mistrust of methodological relativism were distinctly post-war traits when confronting the sexual and religious aspects of human experience. As the last line of my grandfather's book proclaims - 'They [married Catholics] must, as did the correspondents in this book, make known their experience, so that ultimately truth will prevail.'⁴³ I am less interested in pursuing any singular 'truth', and more in the manifold, sometimes conflicting, personal 'truths' that the statements signify.

The experience of practicing NFP

'DG - Could you talk about the experience of using NFP?

Teresa - (sighs) Well we've used it all our lives and I think it's just... (breaks into tears for two minutes)... it's just.... exasperating in one sense.'⁴⁴

Up to this point in the interview, Teresa had reminisced about her youthful 'innocence' in a light and jovial tone. When we moved on to talk about sex, she quickly became upset. Teresa was married in the spring of 1968 amidst a climate of much expectancy within the Catholic community following the leak of the Papal Commission's final report. She explained that the only reason she and her husband Michael had started using NFP was because they 'didn't expect to be using it long'.⁴⁵ However, when the Pope reasserted the Church's prohibition of artificial means of contraception three months later, they decided to grapple with the method a little longer. In the end, they continued practicing NFP for over twenty years, interspersed with sporadic periods of using the Pill. She explained that she never felt completely comfortable with defying the Pope, but that it was primarily her husband's 'scruples', which Teresa attributed to his strict education from Benedictine monks, that meant they always returned to 'natural'

⁴¹ Ibid.

⁴² J. Judge, 'Review of *Love One Another*', *The Tablet*, 25th May 1996.

⁴³ Marshall, *Love One Another*, p.122.

⁴⁴ Teresa, interviewed 4/4/2012.

⁴⁵ Ibid.

means. Although Teresa stressed that these decisions were always ‘mutually agreed through discussion’, she was unlike the majority of the interviewees in that it was her husband who took a dominant role in contraceptive decisions.⁴⁶

Teresa detailed the physiological difficulties they encountered with the method -

‘One of the consequences of the safe period for us, used to be premature ejaculation, which was sort of, obviously disappointing for me, but frustrating and disappointing for him. And then, the whole notion of going more slowly, because of the pressure of the safe period made things difficult, and then sort of in later years, then the other thing is, as he gets older ... you get a degree of, it’s harder to maintain an erection’⁴⁷

Just under half the interviewees spoke of experiencing premature ejaculation in the ‘safe’ period at some point. This was also a relatively common occurrence among my grandfather’s correspondences

‘Although I find on the first marriage act after a lapse of approximately three weeks I cannot control the flow of my semen which occurs immediately as my penis enters the vagina, nevertheless I am able to continue until my wife is satisfied.’⁴⁸

The physiological language which was used by this man was typical of the letters from the 1960s and 1970s, particularly those written by men. It seems that medical terminology provided a more favourable means of disclosing personal information that could be seen to undermine notions of ‘masculine virility’. A popular technique for combating premature ejaculation was ‘going slow’, but, as Teresa found, this had the potential to offer a less than satisfying experience for both parties. One interviewee stated that

‘I never orgasmed during the safe period, we took it slow to help, but as soon as he started to get ahead of steam it was all over. Too much pent up you know.’⁴⁹

As well as detailing the physical problems of abstinence, it should be noted that these quotes do suggested a heightened concern for the wife’s sexual satisfaction (although exactly how the man writing to my grandfather managed to achieve this ‘satisfaction’, or indeed gauge it, was not made clear).

Impotence was not only a problem that developed in later marriage as it did for Teresa’s husband, but also marred the early years of marriage for some couples struggling with NFP.

⁴⁶ Ibid.

⁴⁷ Ibid.

⁴⁸ Marshall, *Love One Another*, p. 43.

⁴⁹ Sorcha, interviewed 09/01/2014.

‘The reading of the thermometer alone caused the sex to be far from spontaneous. As time went on, I sometimes found I was unable to have an erection during the safe period, but often had them when sex might result in an unwanted conception.’⁵⁰

As well as the pressure that ensued from needing to ‘make the most’ of the infertile time, the very notion of a ‘safe’ period was itself de-eroticising. It was a space associated with clinical language, medical apparatus and cold doctors’ rooms. Its ‘safeness’ was the antithesis to everything the dominant liberationist construction of sex claimed to be about— excitement, spontaneity and self-expression. Conversely, the ‘unsafe’ period became distinctly eroticised for many couples, a phenomenon that we will explore in more depth in the next section.

For women in particular, the ‘unsexyness’ of the safe period was not only psychological, but grounded in the physical and bodily routines that accompanied the method. As the husband above pointed out, the reading of the thermometer did cause sex to be less than spontaneous for both partners, but women also had the accompanying procedure to go through. This was all the more trying for some women as the prescriptive literature made a point of stressing that rectal recording was preferable. The image in Appendix C shows an illustration of the discrepancies that could occur between oral and rectal recording presented by the manual The Infertile Period: Principles and Practices. The manual therefore instructed medical representatives guiding couples on the method that

‘The best method of recording is rectally...Recording the temperature rectally is not difficult. Lubricating the bulb of the thermometer with a little Vaseline enables the tip to be easily inserted and three minutes recording ensures reliable reading. If this method is routinely recommended as the normal procedure most women have no objection to it’⁵¹

A number of the interviewees found the act of rectal recording unpleasant, with one stating that

‘I really didn’t like it - you could never fully separate doing that in the mornings from what you did that evening’.⁵²

The aesthetic similarities between rectal recording and the sexual act was an unsettling aspect of NFP that only the wife fully encountered. Filling in the chart, hardly a titillating experience in itself, was also invariably the job of the wife. Mary explained that -

⁵⁰ Marshall, Love One Another, p.43.

⁵¹ The manual did go on to recognise that ‘some women have strong psychological objections to the rectal route of recording’. J. Marshall, The Infertile Period: Principles and Practices, (Baltimore, 1963) p.46-48.

⁵² Georgina, interviewed 22/11/2012.

‘Well yes I did it all. Filling in the graph, with a pencil and ruler, taking the temperature obviously. He [her husband] never took any interest in that side of things.’⁵³

Although NFP’s manuals emphasised the ‘mutual cooperation’ that was needed from both parties for the method to work, the main responsibility for its execution lay with the wife. While a number of historians have spoken of the Pill as a ‘revolutionary’ challenge to gendered notions of contraceptive responsibility, the interviewees tended to view their role in NFP as more of a burden than emancipation.⁵⁴

The process of remembering encouraged some interviewees to rethink their views on the morality of NFP. The interview provided a dedicated space within which to consider the emotional implications of the method, one that may not have existed before this point. Bridget was a particularly interesting example. She identified as ‘orthodox’, explaining that she had always believed ‘in the Church’s teachings pretty much in toto ... and I make no excuses for that’.⁵⁵ She practiced NFP after her second child for the remainder of her ‘sexual years’. She accepted that NFP had been ‘tough’, but went on to say that ‘so is getting up every morning ... this is life when you are a mother.’⁵⁶ In this way, Bridget remembered NFP as another aspect of her maternal labour during early marriage, a part of daily routines and duties alongside tasks such as ‘making the children’s’ breakfast’. She spoke of the method making sex more ‘special’ and drew on a sensualistic allegory to elucidate her point –

‘It’s like when you have a box of chocolates, I love chocolates and I would want to eat the whole of the top layer, but it’s not the best thing. I appreciate them more when I haven’t had it for a while’.⁵⁷

The idea that NFP enhanced the sensual experience of sex by limiting coital frequency was a key feature of the way the method was advertised by Catholic authorities. One correspondent echoed this sentiment -

‘Strangely enough, my husband, who is not a Catholic, feels that the enforced self-control is a good thing – he says we will never get tired of one another as a result of over indulgence!’⁵⁸

⁵³ Mary, interviewed 02/10/2013.

⁵⁴ For an example of such a reading of the Pill’s emancipatory function for women, see Cook, The Long Sexual Revolution, for a discussion of the gendered notions of contraceptive responsibility before the 1960s, see Fisher, Sex Marriage and Birth Control, pp.189-237.

⁵⁵ Bridget, interviewed 16/04/2013.

⁵⁶ Ibid.

⁵⁷ Ibid.

⁵⁸ Marshall, Love One Another, p.59.

It should be noted that aside from Bridget, none of the other interviewees subscribed to this opinion of the method, even those ‘orthodox’ Catholics who kept with it throughout their married lives. As the interview with Bridget developed, she also intimated that she may have been less happy with the method than her chocolate box analogy had suggested.

‘DG – The method was advertised as being spiritually beneficial to the couple as well. Did you find this to be the case?’

‘Bridget - You’re making me think now, at the time we didn’t have time for spiritual soul searching or scratching the wound or whatever ... but there was not so much to take out and look at, and hold up to the light, you know, fidget with. You’re actually making me look into that younger self, well I only perhaps express it that way now... when I’ve only just got it out to look at myself.’⁵⁹

It was clear that Bridget was grappling with her own life story in the course of the interview. My questions were opening up new lines of thought which had not existed in her early marriage. We get here an insight into the time constraints that made ‘spiritual soul searching’ almost impossible in early marriage, but also the stoicism, the sense of ‘getting on with things’, which typified many of the interviewees’ depiction of the life-cycle stage. She went on to say that in the last five years she had started to question her belief in the Church’s teaching on contraception –

‘Do I want this recorded? (pause) I actually think it[contraceptive morality] is between God and the person now. And therefore, if the person next to me approaches the altar of God with his or her belief that they are approaching God, who am I to say well you haven’t had it blessed by the correct, ordained priest. Yes, possibly the Church has had some very strict rules, where... perhaps I’m trying to say that I believe in the essence, but sometimes there has to be some broader look. ...So I’ve come to that and I don’t think you’d have heard me say that when I was twenty-five!’⁶⁰

Although it was more a matter of doctrinal infallibility that Bridget was talking of here, she went on to admit that she ‘would have been happy if *Humanae Vitae* had been different’.⁶¹ It was not only her life story that Bridget was reworking in the course of the interview, but through this, her beliefs on the morality of birth control and the nature of Papal authority.

In both the contemporary correspondences with my grandfather and the interviewees’ retrospective recollections, there was a real emphasis on the physiological, bodily repercussions

⁵⁹ Bridget, interviewed 16/04/2013.

⁶⁰ Ibid.

⁶¹ Ibid.

of practising NFP. The interviewees' memories however, included far more discussion of the emotional effects of the method than the correspondences from the time. Teresa detailed the impact of the method on her relationship -

'So it sort of affected our relationship, inevitably. And we'veerm...(breaks into tears) it's been erm ... great sorrow really, a sorrow about what might have been, er because when you were in bed together, and you want to have sex and you can't have sex, I mean that for... but then you, or certainly we, moved to a stage when it's easier to cope with if you don't get close, and you want sex, it's a self-protection, you know'⁶²

It was not only anger and pain that Teresa expressed in the interview, but a real sense of loss –

'When I think of the years we have lost, the years we could have been happy ... it was not until the 1980s when we sought out counselling that we started to come back together'.⁶³

In the early years of her marriage, a period often remembered as the most amorous by couples, Teresa was forced to sacrifice intimacy with her husband in an attempt to negotiate her spiritual and sexual imperatives.

The correspondents' use of physiological language was hardly surprising given that they were addressing a medical practitioner in formal, written dialogue. References to the method's effect on the couples' interpersonal relationship were rare, but not entirely absent -

'The main difficulty is not abstinence alone, but how to maintain a loving relationship while 'repelling' any advances made. I find myself in the very unpleasant role of 'watchdog'... Looking back now, I realised that what I really needed was advice about how to use this method without damaging our relationship but I did not explain or even realise this at the time.'⁶⁴

The CMAC's marriage preparation as well as the NFP training manuals did not offer much guidance for coping with the psychological or emotional tensions that NFP could exert on a couple. Physical or 'libidinal' frustrations were dealt with, as were 'spiritual aspects', but always separately and with little attention to the interpersonal issues that often accompanied the method.⁶⁵ It is important to note that this correspondent was also 'looking back', much like the interviewees. She did not even realise that she required help with the delicacies of marital communication in the earlier stages of her marriage. As we saw in the opening of the last

⁶² Teresa, interviewed 04/04/2012.

⁶³ Ibid.

⁶⁴ Marshall, *Love One Another*, p.48.

⁶⁵ Angela, interviewed 07/01/2014.

section, the first job of marriage preparation initiatives at the start of the 1960s was to introduce and justify the need to prepare in the first place, to prepare preparation. It seems that the emotional, interpersonal consequences of NFP only fully came to light through the act of remembering. The hustle of day-to-day living in early marriage, coupled with a sexual culture that invariably assumed sexual problems to be physiological, meant that that these aspects of married love were often overlooked in personal and intellectual evaluations of NFP.

This correspondent's anxiety over 'repelling' the advances of her husband hinted at the potential for an unsettling dynamic to develop in the relationship. Similar situations were spoken of in the interviews, but a lack of consent was never insinuated.⁶⁶ Angela's husband was abroad with work for months at a time; she explained that trying to tell him 'Sorry, not till next Thursday' would have been 'absurd'. Although she did describe him as the 'boss' in the relationship, Angela emphasised that her husband never 'pressured' her into anything she did not want to do.⁶⁷ However, she was also aware that her own situation was not representative of the entire Catholic population -

"Conjugal Love' won't make sense to women in the North, the wife of someone working on the shipyard. On a Saturday night he will be half cut, and he wants his Saturday night. If you try to say no you would be hit about. There can be a lot of violence in sex, some people like violence in sex...'⁶⁸

Angela's views on the relationship between sex and violence are explored more fully in the following chapter. She displayed here a consciousness of the class and geographical specificity of her own experience. Her assertions were informed by her work as a CMAC counsellor in the North of England and therefore represent a very specific interpretation of working class culture. The northern, industrial Catholic community, particularly concentrated in towns like Liverpool, Manchester and Bolton, is certainly underrepresented in this thesis – an oral history study of Catholic marriage in these locations would offer a useful means of exploring Angela's claims more thoroughly. Her comments do reflect a relatively widespread belief that periodic abstinence was more suited to the 'mutuality' which was seen to typify middle-class marriages. When the interviewees did speak of NFP's propensity to heighten tensions around the question of 'conjugal rights', it was always in a way that distanced the subject from their own personal experience. Whether this was because of a reticence to disclose sensitive, even incriminating information or because there was nothing to disclose is unknown.

⁶⁶ Historians such as Joanna Bourke have shown how understandings of consent and marital rape underwent significant changes in the post-war period. This large and highly sensitive subject falls beyond the immediate bounds of this thesis, but the Catholic experience would make for a valuable area of future research. J. Bourke, Rape: A History from 1960 to the Present Day, (London, 2008).

⁶⁷ Angela, interviewed 07/01/2014.

⁶⁸ Ibid.

Despite the frustrations and conflicts that many of the interviewees faced while practicing NFP, none of them abandoned their Catholic identity or marital relationship. The vast majority continued to wrestle with the method until at least their late thirties. How should this be understood? The simple answer would be found in the texts that advocate a psychoanalytical reading of Catholicism; that guilt and scrupulosity compelled the couples to continue with a practice that flew in the face of their physical, bodily interests.⁶⁹ Such a view was typified by Vincent Broome's scathing response to *Humanae Vitae*, referenced in this thesis' introduction, which expressed pity for the 'countless number of simple-minded people' who were to be victims of the Church's dogmatic rule. However, alongside a story of religious indoctrination shackling instincts and intuitions, a more optimistic account of individual creativity, resistance and agency emerged. The interviewees' testimony therefore encourages us to reframe the question we ask of their memories – what tactics did Catholic women employ to negotiate the dual demands of spirituality and sexuality? The word tactics rather than strategies is used advisedly. It borrows from Michel de Certeau's distinction between the two. In *The Practice of Everyday Life*, De Certeau spoke of 'strategies' as being produced by institutions and structures of power such as the state, businesses, scientists and the Church, while individuals act in environments defined by strategies by using 'tactics'.⁷⁰ Andrew Blauvelt elucidates Certeau's denotation of 'tactics' in this way -

'Certeau's investigations into the realm of routine practices, or the 'arts of doing' such as walking, talking, reading, dwelling, and cooking, were guided by his belief that despite repressive aspects of modern society, there exists an element of creative resistance to these strictures enacted by ordinary people... Tactics are employed by those who are subjugated. By their very nature tactics are defensive and opportunistic, used in more limited ways and seized momentarily within spaces, both physical and psychological, produced and governed by more powerful strategic relations.'⁷¹

Catholic women were the subject of a peculiar set of 'strategies' in the 1960s; their mental and material environments were being increasingly shaped by the new 'producers' of modernity such as sexual science and consumer culture, but the Church continued to provide the codes and structures that determined their sexual morality. The next section explores the tactics that Catholic women employed during their early marriage to work around, within and against these often conflicting imperatives.

⁶⁹ L. Pyle, *Pope and Pill*, (London, 1968) p.116.

⁷⁰ M. de Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life*, translated by Steven Rendell, (California, 1984).

⁷¹ A. Blauvelt (ed.), *Strangely Familiar: Design and Everyday Life*, (London, 2003) p.20.

Tactics for dealing with penetrative abstinence

The period of abstinence from penetrative intercourse varied from couple to couple depending on the woman's fertility cycle, but generally ran from four to ten days per month. Critics of the method argued that a woman was most responsive to sex during and around ovulation, a point that was exhaustively debated by medical representatives within the Papal Commission. As we saw in the second chapter, a vast corpus of sociological data was collected by both sides to substantiate their cases. These debates tended to centre on whether medical evidence could be sought to establish the anatomical nature of the 'rhythmicity of desire'.⁷² Whether there were physiological grounds to these criticisms or not, the correspondents spoke of the 'unsafe' period as a time of heightened desire -

'I think I am probably one of those people who experience maximum desire around the time of ovulation, as at these times I usually experience insomnia and intense physical restlessness.'⁷³

There were also men who found themselves particularly aroused during the 'unsafe' period -

'I find it very hard to abstain. I have a very beautiful, loving wife and during the unsafe period I seem to find her more desirable than at any other time of the month.'⁷⁴

The female correspondent spoke of 'ovulation' while the male correspondent used the phrase 'unsafe period', reflecting the different levels of bodily involvement of the husband and wife. One male interviewee spoke of sex during the unsafe period as 'forbidden fruit – and all the more desirable because of it'.⁷⁵ It was not only men who eroticised the very idea of the 'unsafe' - a number of the female interviewees spoke of there being something appealing about defying the imposed chastity, using terms like 'dangerous', 'naughty' and 'adventurous'.⁷⁶ Regardless of whether it was understood in physiological or psychological terms, the 'unsafe' period was a time of almost irresistible temptation for many Catholic couples. The compulsion to explain this temptation as an immanently biological phenomenon was typical of the post-war Catholic sexual culture.

The most commonly used tactic for coping with periods of abstinence was masturbation. The vast majority of the interviewees spoke of participating in mutual masturbation, where one partner manually stimulated the other, while around half also spoke of solitary masturbation. The dwindling and yet selectively gendered social stigma that still surrounds solitary

⁷² For a contemporary survey of medical debates about the 'rhythmicity of desire', see J. Marshall, The Infertile Period: Principles and Practices, p.101.

⁷³ Marshall, Love One Another, p. 34.

⁷⁴ Ibid., p. 45.

⁷⁵ Frank, interviewed 18/12/2012.

⁷⁶ Lydia, interviewed 20/03/2013, Teresa, interviewed 04/04/2012, June, interviewed 20/02/2012.

masturbation could have accounted for this discrepancy, but it is more likely that mutual masturbation was a preferred recourse for Catholic women. As well as having sensual and emotional benefits, it was a more practically viable option for Catholic women in their early marriage - 'Well I might have [masturbated alone], but where and when? No there wasn't the time or space for that sort of thing'.⁷⁷

The Church continued to teach that masturbation was a sin in itself as it could not fulfil procreative ends, but unlike contraception, this teaching was not publicly reasserted by the central hierarchy at any point during the interviewees' lives. In fact, a newly sympathetic theology towards the 'naturalness' of masturbation had growing support within the lay and clerical population. Writing in 1965, Jack Dominian spoke of masturbation as a way of exploring sexuality in its immature state, stressing the importance of compassion and understanding when considering its intrinsic morality.⁷⁸ There was still a judgement made of the act, but this now appeared in pathological rather than moralistic terms.

As Katherine's anecdote below suggests, by the mid-1960s many parish priests at a grass roots level were downplaying the immorality of masturbation -

'Funnily enough, talking about masturbation, when we moved in here [1964], there was a talk from the priest about questions about bringing up children, I was in the audience and there was a lot of Irish people there, and one woman asked (puts on Irish accent) 'Father, Father, what do you say to your boy if he masturbates?' He said 'Masturbation? It's like picking your nose!' He said, 'if he sits in the corner all day doing it he's got a problem, but otherwise everybody does it'. And everyone was 'gasps' (chuckles) ... so that was good.'⁷⁹

As well as giving an insight into a sexually progressive strand within the English clergy, this story also highlighted the theological 'orthodoxy' that was seen to permeate the Irish immigrant population. There was also opposition to a more sympathetic view of masturbation within the English Catholic community. A sex manual called Choices in Sex (1970) had its imprimatur removed after complaints about its treatment of masturbation from the Catholic Priests Association (CPA), a relatively small clerical society in England and Ireland with deeply conservative convictions.⁸⁰ The CPA claimed the booklet intended to 'rob them [the readers] of their priceless Catholic faith or corrupt the integrity of their moral lives' and the public debate

⁷⁷ Lydia, interviewed 20/03/2013.

⁷⁸ J. Dominian, The Church and the Sexual Revolution.

⁷⁹ Katherine, interviewed 14/07/2013.

⁸⁰ Q and I De la Bedoyere, Choices in Sex (London, 1970).

that accompanied the dispute filled the Letters pages of mainstream British broadsheets as well as the Catholic press.⁸¹

Resistance to a more sympathetic view of masturbation was not simply the preserve of an 'orthodox', clerically-led minority, but something that many Catholics grappled with internally on a daily basis. One female correspondent informed John Marshall -

'It is only fair to say to you that I have very regretfully been self-abusive and masturbating'.⁸²

The phrase 'self-abuse' and the confessional tone that accompanied this comment were indicative of an attitude to masturbation that has become largely obsolete amongst present-day Catholics. The majority of the interviewees were quite uninhibited when speaking of masturbation, but looked back on their earlier marriage as a time when this would not have been the case. Joan explained that she 'always felt terrible after, I just thought it was wrong'.⁸³

Many interviewees were of the belief that they had had more 'scruples' about solitary masturbation than their husbands. Rosie said she masturbated on her own during periods of abstinence when 'it all got too much', and although they had not expressly spoken about it, was 'quite sure' that her husband also did -

'Rosie - 'I'm sure that my husband had no idea that I was worrying about things like that, because I never told him, I'm sure he never had thoughts like that at all.

DG - As in had scruples?

Rosie - Yes, although he'd been educated in a monastery, but men are different.

DG - Do you think then the scruples are more of a feminine thing?

Rosie - Yes I do, and in fact I've met people who now are my age who still suffer from scruples, which is terrible, it's a terrible burden that the church put on us, it was unforgivable really, and I think a lot of people are... I think I was retarded spiritually; I was still a seven year old until I was in my forties'.⁸⁴

The gendered sense of sexual guilt that many of the interviewees communicated resonated with Brown's description of 'pious femininity'.⁸⁵ Catholic women often carried this burden with them well beyond the 'sexual revolution' of the 1960s. There were also cases of sexual guilt

⁸¹ The Catholic Herald, 10th August 1969, p.2.

⁸² Marshall, Love One Another, p.50.

⁸³ Joan, interviewed 19/09/13.

⁸⁴ Rosie, interviewed 11/09/2012.

⁸⁵ Brown, The Death of Christian Britain, p.9-17.

being more of an issue with the husband than the wife. We saw in the last section how Teresa's husband had been more scrupulous than her about the morality of contraception and the same was the case for masturbation -

'Teresa - And then of course, not so much for me but for Martin, enormous sexual frustration, because masturbation's wrong as well isn't it, you know just... he used to really try and do the right thing, and there were all things he's been told and he's internalised, as wrong, and I was saying I just don't think this was all wrong.'

DG – Did you say this to Martin?

Teresa - Yes, about actually loving each other you know, I just don't believe it's wrong, of course he didn't want to believe but he couldn't get away from it. He would have loved to have believed something different'⁸⁶

Catholic teachings actually allowed greater room for a woman's stimulation outside of penetrative intercourse than for a man's. The popular theologian Christopher West offered this translation of Pope John Paul II's writings on the matter -

*'Since it's the male orgasm that's inherently linked with the possibility of new life, the husband must never intentionally ejaculate outside of his wife's vagina. Since the female orgasm, however, isn't necessarily linked to the possibility of conception, so long as it takes place within the overall context of an act of intercourse, it need not, morally speaking, be during actual penetration'*⁸⁷

This reading of the Catholic doctrine is not without contest, but what West was suggesting was that if a man was to ejaculate before his wife had reached orgasm, it would not be unlawful for the man to then stimulate his partner by either mouth or hand to bring her to orgasm. There was no mention of this in the NFP training manuals from the time and no interviewees recounted a corresponding experience (although they weren't asked about it either). Although this is not the same as masturbation during the 'unsafe period' (which includes no procreative intent and is therefore deemed unlawful outright) the example illuminates the differing materialities of the male and female orgasm. Teresa may have seen her husband's scruples as being rooted in his monastic education, but for men as conscious of doctrinal intricacies as Martin was, the act of 'spilling the seed' would have served as a physical reminder of the Church's insistence on sex's procreative function.

⁸⁶ Teresa, interviewed 04/04/2012.

⁸⁷ C. West, Good News about Sex and Marriage: Answers to Your Honest Questions about Catholic Teaching (New York, 2000), p.88.

Along with manual masturbation, the interviewees spoke of other sexual practices that helped them ease the frustrations of the 'unsafe period'. Oral sex was relatively commonplace –

'Oh yes we used to do that, some men can only be stimulated with a bit of oral sex you know. But yes we started doing that more in the unsafe period and that helped'.⁸⁸

Doreen pointed out that there was 'something different about oral sex, less mechanical, more loving'.⁸⁹ In this sense, oral stimulation offered a different kind of intimacy than that of manual masturbation. Doreen was specifically speaking of fellatio here, but she and many of the interviewees recalled that their partners 'often reciprocated'. Some interviewees expressed an aversion to oral sex on aesthetic grounds, but none had had a moral issue with the practice based on religious grounds.

Anal sex was spoken of less frequently, but was something that a handful of the interviewees explored specifically as a means of coping with the safe period - 'I don't think we would have tried it had it not been for the safe period. It wasn't really for us in the end'.⁹⁰ Another interviewee recalled that they 'discovered' the practice during an 'unsafe' period, and finding it 'quite enjoyable', ended up intermittently practicing throughout their marriage despite giving up on NFP in their mid-thirties.⁹¹ Perversely, the Church's dictates on contraception were encouraging couples to turn to new sexual activities that were equally, if not more condemned by traditional Catholic teaching. Over half the interviewees expressed an aversion to the physicality of anal sex, but unlike oral sex, there were also interviewees who took moral issue with the activity. Katherine was very candid about the sexual activities she 'experimented' with, including mutual masturbation and oral sex, but stated clearly 'I didn't go in for sodomy'. She was not alone in using the phrase 'sodomy' in response to my asking about 'anal sex'.⁹² This was a discourse that clearly remained an integral part of a certain Catholic generation's understanding of sexual morality.

It was not always physical acts of sexual release that were used by Catholic women to deal with the periods of abstinence. An unexpected tactic was the use of humour. Lucy explained that she and her husband 'dealt very badly' with the 'unsafe' period, and so they enlisted the help of a third party -

Lucy - We had a very large teddy bear, you know the kind of thing you win at the fair, which we sometimes used to keep us apart at 'unsuitable' times.

DG - Really, how big was this teddy bear then?

⁸⁸ Angela, interviewed 07/01/2014.

⁸⁹ Doreen, interviewed 11/08/2014.

⁹⁰ Teresa, interviewed 04/04/2012.

⁹¹ Sorcha, interviewed 09/01/2014.

⁹² Katherine, interviewed 14/07/2013.

Lucy - Oh enormous! (chuckles)

DG - Did it work?

Lucy - It was just for fun. We would go to bed and the bear would be in the bed. It would be a bit of a laugh.⁹³

Lucy stressed how the bear helped diffuse tensions at bedtime, but also provided something to hold on to when contact with her husband would have been 'too much to handle'. This creative tactic was an exception to the stories of the guilt laden conflict that defined many of the interviewees' early marriage. It also pointed to the limited recourses available to Catholic women when attempting to mediate the demands of their libido, relationship and religious beliefs. She recalled that a friend of hers 'trained her dog to growl at her husband when he approached her at 'unsuitable' times'.⁹⁴ The efficacy of these alternative tactics should not simply be measured by their success at upholding abstinence, but also in their capacity to keep the couple together and Catholic.

The use of teddy bears and growling dogs were the only tactics employed by the interviewees that did not contravene the Church's official teachings (as far as this author is aware) in some way. In the early years of marriage, some of the interviewees saw illicit sexual release, be it from masturbation, oral sex or anal sex, as a 'lesser evil' than artificial contraception, but the majority spoke of it as something that just 'happened' –

'There wasn't much of a decision, it would just happen. Afterwards I always regretted it, thinking this is a sin, but it never stopped it happening again. We were compelled by our bodies if you like'.⁹⁵

This quote epitomised the way the interviewees described their sexuality as an instinctive, visceral force that drove their behaviour, with the phrase 'it would just happen' reinforcing the sense of unthinking determinism. Although the interviewees remembered their actions as almost inevitable accessions to 'natural instinct', at the time many believed that they were committing grievous sins. For Catholics wanting to alleviate the ensuing guilt, the next logical step was to confess to a priest. Joan pointed out that she was fully aware that she would recommit the sin even as she knelt in the confessional. Although this would have defeated the integrity of her confession, she still continued to confess masturbation throughout her early marriage – 'it made

⁹³ Lucy, interviewed 08/02/2013.

⁹⁴ Ibid.

⁹⁵ Doreen, interviewed 11/08/2012.

me feel better for a bit. You had to play the game'.⁹⁶ The allusion to a game was apt - David Lodge described Catholic morality as being like a game of snakes and ladders –

‘The name of the game was Salvation, the object to get to Heaven and avoid Hell. It was like Snakes and Ladders: sin sent you plummeting down towards the Pit; the sacraments, good deeds, acts of self-mortification, enabled you to climb back towards the light’⁹⁷

In early marriage, Catholic women were often conscious of the contradictions and paradoxes that governed the game they were playing, but still could not free themselves from its confines. As was the case for the characters in Lodge’s book, the movement away from this mentality happened at different speeds for different interviewees, but almost always involved a rejection of the confessional as a source of moral absolution.

In the course of many of the interviewees’ early marriages, confession ceased to function as a vehicle of celestial reconciliation and became instead a space within which to gauge the Church’s position on matters of personal morality, particularly questions of sex. Katherine used to confess masturbating her husband during periods of abstinence, but made sure she sought out the ‘right sort of priest’ for it -

‘The word around was if you wanted to go to confession, you went to Fr. Andrew. Franciscan, he was easy (chuckles) when it was a ‘How Far Can You Go?’ sort of thing’⁹⁸

Katherine’s comments indicate just how variable clerical attitudes to sex and masturbation were in the 1960s, even within the same locality.⁹⁹ However, it was her trusted confessor of choice who ended up breaking her lingering devotion to the sacrament of confession –

‘I remember going to confession to talk about masturbating my husband when it wasn’t the safe period. Then I found out that he himself was having an affair with someone in the Parish! (chuckles) You know, I thought, bloody hell, I’ve been confessing this to

⁹⁶ Joan, interviewed 19/01/2013.

⁹⁷ Lodge, *How Far*, pp. 6-7.

⁹⁸ Katherine, interviewed 14/07/2013.

⁹⁹ Andrew Greeley’s survey of the American clergy indicates that a ‘sexual revolution’ occurred in their attitudes to contraception; by 1965, 49% of parish priests stated that they disagreed with the central Church’s teaching on the matter, almost exactly the same percentage as in the lay community. Although there was no comparative research undertaken in Britain, Leo Pyle has collected much anecdotal evidence in the form of letters to bishops, parish sermons and newspaper reports that suggest the attitudes of the British clergy were not dissimilar, A.Greeley, ‘The Sexual Revolution in the Catholic Clergy’, *Review of Religious Research*, 14, (1973), pp. 91-100, Pyle, L., *Pope and Pill*, (London, 1968).

him while he's ... I'm not saying everyone's the same but it rather put me off my confession. I think that that liberated me a bit.'¹⁰⁰

At the start of many of the interviewees' early marriages, confession was an important part of the tactics they employed for negotiating spiritual and sexual demands. It was still a space in which matters of religion and sexuality could meet and be mediated under the watchful gaze of the clergy. As they moved through this life-cycle stage though, episodes like the one that Katherine recalled not only undermined the moral authority of the clergy, but also encouraged Catholic women to see their sexual behaviour as something that bore little relation to matters of faith.

With the confessional no longer representing the same space of spiritual expression that it had for the interviewees' parents' generation, I was interested to hear how prayer helped the interviewees deal with the strains and difficulties they experienced with NFP. However, the interviewees did not bring this up of their own volition, and so I started asking specifically about the role of prayer; did they pray for strength during the 'unsafe' period, for guidance with questions of sexual morality or for forgiveness when they believed themselves to have sinned? Again, I received very little response. A number of the interviewees talked of starting to pray about these matters in their later marriage – we have heard how Anne 'prayed in agony' in the lead up to her moment of 'liberation'.¹⁰¹ But it seems that in early marriage, sexual issues were either deemed an unsuitable topic or simply did not factor in Catholic women's thinking at the moment of prayer - 'No not really. I didn't really think to, you don't pray about things like that do you'.¹⁰² This mental separation between prayer and matters of sex was made all the more problematic by the shared physical spaces which they inhabited. Marian explained to me that religious practice and sex could not coexist in the same spaces -

'Marian - If you take your beads before you got to bed, it's a death-knell to the marriage. We used to say our rosary when the children were still up at 6, yes we would kneel down then too.

DG – Why would it be a death-knell to your marriage?

Marian - (pause) well because, not many men would say it was that proper to have intercourse with someone who had just, who was still, just said a prayer. You go to pray yeah - give yourself a bit of a break.

DG – Did your husband ever say that to you?

¹⁰⁰ Katherine, interviewed 14/03/2013.

¹⁰¹ Anne, interviewed 24/3/12.

¹⁰² Sorcha, interviewed 09/01/2014.

Marian – No, no I knew it. Things don't have to always be said for people to know'¹⁰³

Marian's comments encapsulated the tensions and contradictions that defined Catholic women's daily negotiation of sexual and religious imperatives; the two were at once both physically tethered and yet mentally separated. Her notion of a sexually conducive mood and environment, shaped primarily by her interpretation of her husband's wishes, could not accommodate the intrusion of religious sentiment. Furthermore, religious sentiment represented the 'death-knell' for intimate marital relations, the direct antipode to a liberated, masculinist construction of healthy sexual expression. In this sense, the break between the religious and the sexual was an ontological re-categorisation of lived experience as much as knowledge.

The tactics that the interviewees employed to deal with the strains of practising NFP were almost always physical. They spoke of using masturbation, both mutual and solitary, oral and occasionally anal sex to deal with the periods of abstinence, rather than prayer and confession as the advice literature encouraged. Abstinence brought about immanent frustrations that were alleviated by immanent means. The interviewees' early marriages were remembered as a time when they worked to appease the visceral, instinctive urges of the 'sexual self' that would eventually be set free in their later marriage. Marian's comments prompt us to think again of the shared times and places that sexual and spiritual activities inhabited in Catholic women's early marriage. She spoke of needing to consciously take a 'break' between sexual and religious practices, to actively construct a spatial and temporal barrier between the two. But why did this material proximity exist in the first place? Was it simply a matter of practicality, or did it speak of a more complementary relationship between the sexual and the religious? The next section explores these questions and considers how we can historicise a reciprocal connection between sex and religion in the post-war when so little affirmative discourse exists.

Pursuing a reciprocal relationship between sex and religion

At the project's inception, one of my aims was to explore the way spiritual and sexual experiences could affirm each other. Conflicts between the two have understandably received much attention in recent years and were always likely to form a major part of the interviewees' testimony. For many, these conflicts were the main motivation behind participating in the project. The interviewees' abiding memories of early marriage clearly drew a negative correlation between their Catholic religiosity and sexual experiences, but there were surely instances when this was not the case. What interested me was the way pleasurable experiences

¹⁰³ Marian, interviewed 26/09/2013.

could be seen to affirm religious beliefs, and how in reciprocation, religious beliefs could inform these bodily sensations.

There is an extensive literary tradition that discusses the relationship between ‘divine’ and ‘romantic’ love in relation to Catholicism. Much of the Catholic catechism on the subject has been drawn from the writings of St. Augustine and Thomas Aquinas, who mused on the interrelationship between ‘eros’ (sexual love), ‘agape’ (brotherly or charitable love) and ‘divine’ love (love of or for God).¹⁰⁴ In the late nineteenth century, the Jesuit priest Gerald Manley Hopkins was to explore his own homoerotic impulses through verse, drawing on the image of Christ to make a connection between physical and spiritual sensations.¹⁰⁵ At the start of the twenty-first century, Pope’s Benedict XVI’s Encyclical Letter **Deus Caritas Est** addressed the meaning of the terms ‘Eros’ and ‘Agape’ in a contemporary context -

‘Eros, reduced to pure “sex”, has become a commodity, a mere “thing” to be bought and sold, or rather, man himself becomes a commodity. This is hardly man's great “yes” to the body.’

‘Love is indeed ‘ecstasy’, not in the sense of a moment of intoxication, but rather as a journey, an ongoing exodus out of the closed, inward-looking self towards its liberation through self-giving, and thus towards authentic self-discovery and indeed the discovery of God’¹⁰⁶

The Encyclical demonstrated the Catholic hierarchy’s continuing proclivity for the psychoanalytical language of the ‘self’ when making sense of love and sexuality, just as had been the case in Humanae Vitae forty years earlier. Pope Benedict’s discussion of ‘agape’ and ‘eros’ ultimately argued that it would be a ‘misconception either to confuse the two or oppose them’. His letter therefore reasserted two continuities in Catholic thinking that can be traced back to Augustine and Aquinas, albeit in a new vocabulary; firstly that there was indeed a distinction between different forms of love, and secondly, that there was a connection between these forms. ‘Self-discovery’ through sexual love was intimately connected to the discovery of God. For all of these Catholic thinkers, divine and romantic love informed one another. If the reciprocity between sexual and religious sensibilities has represented a major theme in the writings of theological and cultural elites, how then did this idea feature in the thoughts and experiences of Catholic women in the post-war? The way it was positioned in the testimony of

¹⁰⁴ For a discussion of the relationship between Aquinas and Augustine’s writings on love, see M Dauphinais, B. David and M. Levering (eds.), Aquinas the Augustinian, (Catholic University of America, 2007).

¹⁰⁵ E. Baugh (ed.), Poems and Prose of Gerald Manley Hopkins, (London, 1985).

¹⁰⁶ Pope Benedict XVI, Deus Caritas Est, (2005) accessed at http://w2.vatican.va/content/benedict-xvi/en/encyclicals/documents/hf_ben-xvi_enc_20051225_deus-caritas-est.html.

the interviewees reveals much about the nature of early marriage, as well as the way sex and religion have been categorised at an everyday, social level.

Of all the interviewees, only Michaela, who no longer identified as Catholic by her late teens, spoke of having sex before marriage.¹⁰⁷ Early marriage was therefore remembered as a period in which new bodily sensations were encountered and explored. Even amongst those who spoke of masturbating in their adolescence (which, as we will see in the next chapter, was a minority within the sample), sex introduced Catholic women to a set of physical and emotional feelings that they had not experienced before –

‘I don’t think people today could appreciate how... different, how new these feelings were. Although in those early years it was always difficult with ...[NFP], there were also moments when it was fantastic. But this was all completely new’¹⁰⁸

Early marriage was a period in which Catholic women became conscious of the potential for new and heightened pleasures of the flesh. The question I am left with is how these bodily sensations were seen to relate to their existing Catholic beliefs.

A range of open and closed questions were used in the interviews to explore this connection - Did you ever pray to give thanks or ask for sexual pleasure in the early years your marriage? Can you talk about your beliefs on the purpose of sexual pleasure when you first started having sex? How, if at all, did sexual pleasure affirm your religious beliefs in your early marriage? Did you see your orgasm as a god given gift? More direct and detailed questions were also asked in an attempt to uncover any links between sexual pleasure and religious belief -

‘What I find interesting is that sexual and religious experiences are often seen as incompatible in the modern world, but they also occupy the same spaces like evenings, bedrooms, Sundays. They are also linked through their capacity to transcend the body. Can you talk to me about the links that existed between your personal spirituality and sexuality in those early years of marriage?’

A handful of the interviewees denied that any affirmative connection had existed for them at all. This was Teresa’s response to the more detailed question outlined above -

‘Teresa - But there aren’t any links if it’s all in compartments.

DG – Did you feel that your religiosity in any way informed the way you experienced sex and sexual pleasure?

¹⁰⁷ Michaela, interviewed 07/04/2013.

¹⁰⁸ Mary, interviewed 02/10/2013.

Teresa- Well it informed it in a negative way, it's about what you can't do, the whole focus is on what you can't do not what you can do. The focus is not, this is how it was received anyway, the whole focus is not on how you can please your partner, but all these things you can't do, or you shouldn't do.'¹⁰⁹

For Teresa, her religiosity existed as a set of rules and restrictions that could only affect her sexual experiences in a negative way. It was only through separating her Catholic religiosity from matters of sexual morality that the two could co-exist. This sort of response was more common amongst the interviewees who had spoken with more fervour about the difficulties they had experienced with NFP.

However, the majority of the interviewees gave a different response to this line of questioning. They affirmed that there had been a reciprocal connection between their religious beliefs and sexual experiences, but did not elaborate beyond this point. In fact, the distinct lack of articulation on the matter, despite my persistent probing, was a striking feature of many of the interviews. The examples below were from two otherwise particularly responsive interviewees -

'DG - Can you talk to me about a positive connection between sex and religion. Did you ever feel that your sexual experiences affirmed your religious beliefs in those early years of marriage?

Anne - Yes. They did.

DG – How did sexual pleasure affirm your belief in a Catholic God?

Anne – In the pleasure.'¹¹⁰

'DG - What I find interesting is that sexual and religious experiences are often seen as incompatible, but they also occupy the same spaces like evenings, bedrooms, Sundays. They are also linked through their capacity to transcend the body. Can you talk to me about the links that existed between your personal spirituality and sexuality in your early marital years?

Lynn – Yes, they were connected of course.

DG – Did you ever pray to give thanks for sexual pleasure?

Lynn – Yes, at times.'¹¹¹

¹⁰⁹ Teresa, interviewed 04/04/2012.

¹¹⁰ Anne, interviewed 24/03/2012.

How should the distinct lack of articulation in response to these questions be understood? It became apparent to me that the interviewees had not expected to be asked about this. It was a line of questioning that they had not prepared for. The expectations that they took into the interview process were symptomatic of popular perceptions of the relationship between sex and religion, as well as dominant academic interests in this relationship. But their pre-interview mind-set alone does not account for the quantifiable lack of response to this line of enquiry – there were plenty of other questions that the interviewees were not expecting to which they gave far fuller responses. It could be suggested that the time difference between early marriage and the point of interview would have rendered these details difficult to recall. Again though, the interviewees were perfectly capable of remembering the intricacies of other sensations and feelings from the time, notably the pain and suffering they encountered with NFP.

‘Discourse analysis’ has proved a particularly popular approach to oral history in the last two decades and could provide a potential explanation for the interviewees lack of articulation on this matter. In their seminal oral history study of Sex Before the Sexual Revolution, Kate Fisher and Simon Szreter speak of ‘unavailable discourses’ limiting and restricting the possible means of expression available to individual interviewees.¹¹² This idea offers an interesting way of thinking about Catholic women’s memories of early marriage. In wider culture, there has been less discussion of an affirmative connection between sex and religion, particularly in relation to Catholicism, since the 1960s. Indeed, the media’s coverage of the recent child abuse scandals has ensured that Catholicism is ubiquitously associated with patriarchal, sexual repression. The interviewees’ lack of articulation on an affirmative connection between sex and religiosity could be attributed to the ‘silences’ that have emerged in public discourses, restricting the languages available to them at the point of recollection.

However, it is important to note that it was not exactly a ‘silence’ that was displayed in the interviews. The interviewees did not deny or rebut my questions about an affirmative connection, but simply chose not to elaborate on their succinct answers. This is a key distinction. The interviewees did actually affirm that there was a connection, but felt no desire to expand beyond this. Oral history practitioners have theorised over their interviewees’ ‘reticence’ to speak about certain topics, but it is important to specify the meaning of the term reticence in this context.¹¹³ It is often taken to denote a reluctance to speak, reflecting an individual’s lack of comfort with the topic or narratives in question. However, reticence in this sense does not seem to aptly describe the responses of the interviewees in this study. Their demeanour and body language did not suggest a discomfort with this line of questioning, nor

¹¹¹ Lynn, interviewed 12/02/2012.

¹¹² K. Fisher and S. Szreter, Sex Before the Sexual Revolution, (Cambridge, 2010).

¹¹³ L. Layman, ‘Reticence in Oral History Interviews’, Oral History Review, 36, (2009) pp. 207-230.

did I get the sense that this was a topic they felt unhappy discussing with an academic investigator (although this can not be discounted with absolute certainty). Rather than being rooted in a psychological foible, their lack of articulation represented an expression of the ineffable when addressing the relationship between sex and religion. The circumscribed nature of their responses tacitly enunciated the limitations of language itself when making sense of certain experiences. Georgina, for example, commented that –

‘I could try to speak to you about what I felt and thought then, but I don’t know if I could do justice to it. The link between my sexual feelings - sexual pleasures - and my Catholic beliefs were in some ways very complicated, but in other ways very simple really.’¹¹⁴

The succinct responses that this line of questioning yielded offer some indication of the delicate and enigmatic relationship which religious and sexual sensibilities shared for Catholics. A telling response to this line of questioning came from Angela –

‘DG – How did the pleasures you experienced when you started having sex relate to your beliefs in a Catholic God?

Angela – In many ways.

DG - Did you ever pray about, or give thanks for sex in your prayers?

Angela – Hmm, I think so, perhaps I should have done more (chuckles)’

DG - Did you see sexual pleasure as something that affirmed a belief in God?

Angela - No, no. I’m sorry you’re off into the realms of the poetic ... just trying to think of, the Songs of Solomon you’re trying to think of...from the bible, is that what you’re trying to get at?’¹¹⁵

Angela commented that I was ‘overanalysing’ her testimony in pursuing an affirmative connection between sex and religion. She saw this connection as the domain of ‘artists and thinkers’ rather than as something that related to her own lived experiences. She and many other interviewees did not feel a need to expand on the matter; to do so could have confounded the meaning of their recollections. In this sense, their lack of articulation was less about the absence of available discourses at a particular historical moment and more a comment on the limitations of language per se.

¹¹⁴ Georgina, interviewed 22/11/2012.

¹¹⁵ Angela, interviewed 07/01/2014.

The interviewees' concise responses to my attempts to pursue a reciprocal relationship between sexual and religious sensations revealed two important features of post-war cultural change. Firstly, their reticence on the subject was a testament to the separation of sex and religion that has occurred in a late-modern context. The interviewees' memories of early marriage were dominated by the tensions and conflicts that typified their nascent sex lives. These experiences, detailed in the previous sections, overrode affirmative memories and provided the principal impetus behind the 'telling' of their life stories.¹¹⁶ Secondly, the succinct nature of the interviewees' responses reflected a particular reading of sex that has taken hold since the 1960s. Sexual experience was understood to be a matter of physical temporality; words and ideas were deemed to be incapable of communicating its full meaning. The interviewees' testimonies therefore offer an insight into the nature of the categories that sex and religion were placed within. While sex was defined in a framework of immanent experience, religion became positioned as its ethereal other, a matter of intellect, symbol and conjecture. There may have been moments of reciprocity between sex and religion in Catholic women's early marriage, but it must be acknowledged that oral history holds a limited capacity to uncover them. This limitation itself speaks of the fractious nature of Catholic early marriage as well as the shifting ontologies of sex and religion in the post-war.

Conclusion

The prevailing memory that many of the interviewees had of their early marriages was of pain, suffering and disquiet. At the time, the bustle of family life, a lack of heightened expectations and a stoic outlook encouraged Catholic women to 'get on with things', as Bridget put it. It was the experiences of later marriage that brought in to focus the extent of the physical and emotional hardship they underwent with NFP. This retrospection does not delegitimise the value of the interviewees' memories though, but opens up otherwise obscured emotional and sensual aspects of sexual intimacy. It is this facet of oral history research which could help reframe the way the 'personal' is constructed within Catholic debates about contraceptive morality. The material contained in the middle section of this chapter provides a starting point for such an undertaking. Catholic women's memories, when treated with the appropriate methodological provisions, highlight the messy, varied and highly subjective processes through which meaning and experience interact.

The separation of sexual and religious sensibilities which occurred in the liberal interviewees' later marriages was rooted in the everyday experiences of their early married life. It was a

¹¹⁶ Plummer, *Telling Sexual Stories*, pp.3-17.

conceptual divide which did not simply work at the level of discourse, but shaped the concrete, material spaces that sexual and religious activities occupied. Marian's assertion that praying in her marital bed would have been the 'death-knell' for her marriage epitomised the way this separation affected the cultural geography and daily routines of quotidian existence.¹¹⁷ Indeed, it was the shared physical spaces that the two inhabited which often forced Catholic women to seek out new and creative tactics for dealing with the ensuing conflicts. Their role in actively negotiating spiritual and sexual demands allowed them to maintain their Catholic affiliation, while laying the foundations for the 'liberal' identities that they would go on to adopt. This chapter has emphasised the agency that both 'liberal' and 'orthodox' Catholic women exercised in their early years of marriage, despite the array of mental and material structures that framed their existence. The final chapter moves back in to Catholic women's pre-marital sexualities, but does so not to seek an explanation or root cause of their marital behaviour. Early life is treated as a constitutive rather than formative life-cycle stage. In so doing, the significance of the experiences documented in the chapters thus far are not undermined, but recognised as lived moments affected by what oral historians would call human agency, what Catholics would understand to be free will.

¹¹⁷ Marian, interviewed 26/09/2013.

Chapter 5

Early life and pre-marital sexuality

The final chapter of this thesis looks at Catholic women's sexual and religious development in the years that preceded their marriages. For all the interviewees bar one, this period did not involve any penetrative intercourse. For the vast majority, there was also little to no genital activity of any kind with a partner, while only six spoke of solitary masturbation. This period in the interviewees' lives was most distant to them at the point of interview, but I do not want to get caught up in questions of 'disclosure' or 'reliability'. Nor am I interested in debating the definitions of terms like 'childhood', 'youth', and 'adolescence'; others have theorised over the parameters that should be drawn around these descriptors.¹ Indeed, the tendency to focus on the intricacies of this period in a person's life, particularly in relation to sexual and religious development, is itself one that will be historicised here. The experiences of an eight year old Catholic girl were, of course, very different from that of an eighteen year old, but the interviewees tended to remember their sexual development in a way that drew them together under the banners 'early life', 'upbringing' or 'before marriage'. 'Early life' is therefore treated as both a life-cycle stage which Catholic women lived through as well as a subject which has been debated, defined and understood by different individuals and institutions. As has been the case throughout this thesis, the chapter demonstrates that there was a close relationship between the two - the personal, lived experiences of young Catholic women and the broader, intellectual understandings of the life-cycle stage.

This chapter works from the position that early life, whether described in terms of childhood, adolescence or youth, has been endowed with an inflated significance by academics assessing personal religiosity in the post-war. In academic texts and the wider imagination, childhood has been placed at the centre of 'rationalist' explanations of religious belief.² Catholicism, to a greater degree than any other belief system, ideology or source of identity, has become understood to be the product of indoctrination or psychological programming in a person's early life. The quote 'give me a boy until he's seven and I'll show you the man', often attributed to St. Francis Xavier and commonly associated with the Jesuits, has been regurgitated in countless attacks on Catholic belief in the last fifty years.³ This reading of early life is historically specific; the final section of the chapter details how it was informed by the ascendancy of popular psychoanalytical thought in the immediate post-war years. In this sense, the chapter

¹ For example see B. Osgerby, *Youth in Britain since 1945*, (Oxford, 1998).

² This reading of religiosity has been taken to an extreme by Richard Dawkins, who provocatively described bringing up a child in a religion as 'child-abuse' in an open letter to the then Secretary of State, Estelle Morris. R. Dawkins, 'Children must choose their own beliefs', *The Guardian* 30 December 2001.

³ For example, R. Dawkins, *The God Delusion*, (Reading, 2007) p. 206.

builds on the recent work of Matthew Thomson which, in the words of one reviewer, ‘develops a growing emphasis on the mid-20th century as a crucial moment in the development of thinking about childhood ...and in the increasing importance of psychological ways of thinking in popular debate.’⁴ The intention here is to cut ‘early life’ down to size in academic accounts of religious life stories. By treating childhood as a constitutive rather than determinative life-cycle stage, the complex meanings and motivations behind religious and sexual identities can be brought in to focus.

The association between religion and infantilism was a conspicuous presence in the interviews; some interviewees adopted elements of it while others actively resisted the link.⁵ The latter group were eager to emphasise the agency they exercised within their own religious upbringings. They often spoke out against the indictment that their Catholicism had been imposed upon them in their childhood. Some even singled out specific public figures that represented and espoused this form of militarised secularism. The final section moves on to consider how psychoanalytical interpretations of childhood belief affected the interviewees’ approach to parenting. Although they readily imparted Catholic theology to their offspring, religious ideals were almost entirely absent from their sexual guidance. The thesis concludes by reflecting on what this approach to parenting can tell us about the shifting relationship between sex and religion, and how the interviewees envisioned this relationship developing in the future.

While the interviewees stressed a sense of agency in their early religious life, they also emphasised their relative ‘innocence’ and ‘sexual ignorance’ compared to not only girls of today, but also their male and non-Catholic peers.⁶ This was often a trait that they were conscious of at the time. The second section of the chapter explores how the interviewees’ gender and Catholicism intersected to shape their understanding of sexuality in adolescence. It uses Brown notion of pre-sixties ‘pious femininity’ as a starting point from which to assess the gendered expectations that surrounded the politics of courtship, chastity and desire.⁷ The interviewees’ interpretation of their ‘innocence’ did not always accord with Brown’s story of imposed suppression. Instead, many remembered the climate of innocence and naivety that pervaded their early sexual development with a sense of ambivalence and even nostalgia. The interviewees’ experiences of marital sexuality clearly affected the way this period was remembered – some saw their youthful sexual ignorance as the root cause of the troubles they experienced in marriage, while for others, these troubles incited them to view their youth with a wistful longing. Their memories of this period would have undoubtedly been shaped by more recent sexual experiences, but this does not make their interpretations any less insightful. The

⁴ L. King, ‘Review of *Psychological Subjects*’, accessed at <http://www.history.ac.uk/reviews/review/1641>.

⁵ The term ‘infantilism’ is defined and unpacked in more detail in the final section of the chapter.

⁶ Teresa, interviewed 04/04/2012, June, interviewed 20/02/2012.

⁷ Brown, *The Death of Christian*, pp.170-175.

tone, mood and emotions that accompanied the interviewees' recollections of early life offer an insight into how this life-cycle stage was experienced at the time, as well as the interpretive filter they developed subsequently.

The chapter begins with a discussion of the sexual education that was available to Catholic women in the post-war decades. The interviewees were of a generation who received little to no formal sexual education. The first section therefore attends to the multiform and ad hoc sources of sexual knowledge that young Catholic women sought in the years immediately surrounding the War (late 1930s to 1950s). What was apparent was that no correlation existed between the form of sexual education received in adolescence and the eventual religious belief system taken up in adulthood. Attributing an interviewees' eventual 'orthodox' or 'liberal' Catholic identity, or any other aspect of their beliefs, to their sexual education is therefore misleading.

The first section then turns its attention to the sudden proliferation of Catholic sexual education initiatives that emerged in the middle of the 1960s. It looks at the sexual instruction that was provided to Catholic girls in schools and manuals. There was an underlying commonality in the way these initiatives were framed by progressive Catholic authorities and the way the interviewees remembered their own sexual education. The most recurrent theme that ran through the interviewees' testimony was the idea that their sexual education had been an act of self-revelation or discovery, something that 'just happened' or was 'naturally in them'. A discourse of the 'natural' was central to the way they made sense of their sexual development. Although the Catholic sexual educators of the 1960s were of the opinion that sex needed to be taught rather than just discovered, they too shared this conception of sex as a 'natural', instinctive and ultimately immanent entity. The section therefore introduces an argument that runs throughout the chapter; that changes in Catholic understandings of pre-marital sexuality in the post-war decades were the product of a much deeper shift in the way sex and religion were ontologically categorised.

Catholic sexual education

The sexual education provided to Catholic adolescents underwent rapid and substantial change in the post-war years. Growing up in the decades immediately surrounding the war, the vast majority of the interviewees received no formal sex education at all, let alone from Catholic sources. It was not until the middle of the 1960s that authorities within the Church, Catholic schools and affiliated organisations began to move into this area. As Lutz Sauerteig and Roger Davidson have demonstrated, sexual education became a major point of contest across

European societies in the 1960s.⁸ Informed by the theories of Wilhelm Reich, the ‘sexual repression’ of childhood was increasingly seen as a ‘major cause of human cruelty’, an indictment that moved beyond the circles of leftist and progressive ‘sex radicals’ into the popular consciousness.⁹ The emergence of Catholic sexual education initiatives was therefore a response to developments in secular culture, while also reflecting a growing awareness from within the Catholic community that more needed to be done to educate the younger generation.

As well as tracing the emergence of ‘formal’ Catholic sexual education in the post-war years, this section also explores the more diffuse, ad hoc forms of sex education to which young Catholic women were exposed. The interviewees spoke of sourcing sexual knowledge from their parents, peers, media, cultural representations and the ‘natural world’. Indeed, the ‘natural’ was a key discourse used by the interviewees when making sense of their sexual development. Among the variable sources that the interviewees identified, there was no correlation with their eventual religious identities, sexual morality or contraceptive practice. In this way, the sexual education that Catholic women received should not be viewed as determinative of their ensuing religious identities, but a lived component of a particular life-cycle stage.

For Catholics going through their teenage years before the 1960s, the parental home served as a leading source of sexual knowledge, although rarely in the form of expressed dialogue. Only one of the interviewees spoke of receiving ‘the talk’ from her mother –

‘It was when I had my first period, she sat me down and did the birds and bees thing. Maybe I should have already known about things but I think this was the first time I put things together’¹⁰

Generally though, the interviewees spoke of learning from their parents without being actively taught by them. Leonie explained that she learnt from ‘example’-

‘I could see them together, and how they were with each other. And I suppose that’s how I learnt about men and women, romantic love. I think I just made the natural connection between that and the things I learnt in biology’¹¹

The ‘natural connection’ that Leonie spoke of was typical of the way the interviewees made sense of their sexual education. Her testimony suggested a distinction between questions of gender and love, which she learnt from her parents, and sex, which was a matter of biological

⁸ L. Sauerteig and R. Davidson (eds.), *Shaping Sexual Knowledge: A cultural history of sex education in twentieth century Europe*, (New York, 2009).

⁹ W. Reich, *The Sexual Revolution: Towards a Self-Governing Character Structure*, (London, 1969).

¹⁰ Mary, interviewed 02/10/2013.

¹¹ Leonie, interviewed 10/12/2013.

mechanics. Crucially, it was left to her to make a connection between the two rather than this connection being made for her.

It was often in the family home that Catholic girls would be introduced to the subject of birth control. Catholic girl's schools did not offer any formal sex education in the 1950s, let alone anything that dealt with questions of contraception. Their mothers therefore often represented the first point of contact with the matter. Sorcha came from an 'academic family' who 'had always spoken out against the Church's teaching on artificial means'. Although her mother never explicitly commented on her own practice to Sorcha directly, Sorcha explained that she could tell from the spacing of her siblings' births that her mother was using 'some form of apparatus'.¹² Sorcha's mother was a rarity among the interviewees' parent's generation in that she was willing to defy the Church's teaching well before the birth control debate took off in the public realm during the 1960s. Despite this example in her early life, Mary chose to grapple with NFP at the start of her marriage, only moving on to the Pill in her forties. While the interviewees were introduced to the morality of birth control by their parents, their eventual contraceptive behaviour was not determined by these examples.

Penny was the only other interviewee who was aware that her mother had used artificial means, but gleaned this knowledge in a very different way -

'I remember as a twelve year old finding a book, about family planning and, not that at that age did it dawn on me that that was something the Church said you shouldn't do, but I was a bit fascinated that it was hidden, you know it was hidden, my mother liked reading, but this was hidden. And later as I got older I realised this must have been a problem for her, my mother, because during those fertile years she stopped going to church, later she went back, after the menopause she went back again, but she was quite a long time when she didn't go'¹³

The culture of secrecy that surrounded birth control in the immediate post-war years was a key difference between the settings of the interviewees' marriages and that of their parents' generation. Penny's mother's decision not to go to Mass while she was using artificial means, or at least Penny's reading of this decision, was one that reflected a different understanding of devotional practice, when the prospect of receiving communion in a state of mortal sin would keep individuals away from Church all together. Where the interviewees negotiated spiritual and sexual demands by reformulating their personal beliefs on birth control, Penny's mother was of a generation who were thought to have been compelled to sacrifice Mass attendance.

¹² Sorcha, interviewed 09/02/2014.

¹³ Penny, interviewed 28/07/2013.

Penny's fascination with her mother's concealed book epitomised the restricted but also diverse avenues of sexual knowledge that were available to Catholic teenagers in the 1940s and 1950s. It was the 'hidden' nature of the book that aroused her interests initially, but it was only at a later stage that she could fully appreciate the significance of what it contained. Catholic teenage girls were often left to discover and interpret sex in their own ways. The gaps and silences that continued to pervade Catholic attitudes to adolescent sexual education in the 1950s ensured that Catholic teenagers encountered sex for the first time in idiosyncratic and often highly personal ways. The advent of formal Catholic sexual education in the late 1960s went some way to limiting this variability.

The exchange of information within peer groups has frequently been cited by historians as a leading, if not formative, source of sexual information for young people in the twentieth century.¹⁴ The interviewees were split into two camps in this respect – just over half of the sample said that they spoke about sexual matters in depth with friends at school, while the remaining half stressed that they hardly spoke of sex at all until they left school. The type of school that was attended would have undoubtedly affected this, but there was no clear correlation in terms of mixed/single sex, state/private or Catholic/non-Catholic school (twenty one of the twenty six interviewees attended a Catholic school, of which twelve attended a convent school). What was apparent from the interviews was that Catholic teenage girls often considered themselves and their Catholic friends more 'innocent' or sexually 'ignorant' than non-Catholic girls –

'DG – Did you talk about sex with your friends at school?

Teresa - Not much no. Girls didn't talk about that sort of thing ... there would be no in depth conversations, we were Catholic girls. Catholic girls didn't do that sort of thing. I knew that others did, but it wasn't for us!'¹⁵

'Patricia - We were so naïve. I remember being aware that other girls were different in that way. At other schools they talked about sex. We did talk about some things like the boys we liked and that sort of thing. But not sex, not us Catholic girls.'¹⁶

Catholicism was central to many of the interviewees' social networks when they were growing up in the 1950s. With their friendship groups often drawn from schools, parish communities or Catholic localities, 'sexual innocence' was a trait of collective as well as individual identity. As Simon Szreter and Kate Fisher's oral history research has indicated, gendered expectations

¹⁴ This view was set out by the sociologist Christine Farrell in the 1970s and has been subsequently corroborated by Fisher and Szreter among others. C. Farrell, *My Mother Said... The Way Young People Learn About Sex and Birth Control*, (London, 1978), Fisher and Szreter, *Sex Before the Sexual Revolution*, p.74.

¹⁵ Teresa, interviewed 04/04/2012.

¹⁶ Patricia, interviewed 03/05/2013.

about sexual naivety were not specific to the Catholic community in pre-1960s Britain.¹⁷ Nevertheless, young Catholic girls perceived themselves to be less informed than their non-Catholic counterparts on account of their religious identity.

The interviewees primarily understood their sexual education as something that occurred 'naturally'. Many struggled to recall exactly how and when they first learnt about sex, but they often spoke of it 'just happening' or 'being part of nature' -

'You learn about the birds and the bees, but really it's just in you. You don't learn it, it's just your body. It's just natural isn't it?'¹⁸

This discourse of the 'natural' appeared in a particular form in the recollections of one interviewee who spent part of her early life in a rural location -

'Angela – During the war I was evacuated on to a farm, and I don't know if you've ever seen a stallion have a go, but I can tell you, the length of his penis is to be marvelled at. It's a wonderful sight! It really is! So from that onwards ... if you're on a farm you know exactly how it's done.'

'It must follow since we are all animals that's the way it is'¹⁹

Angela took her sexual education from the 'natural world' in a very direct way. It was not just a knowledge of anatomical procedures that she developed on the farm, but also notions of gendered desire –

'Again I would refer you to the natural world. Most animals have to fight before they get any sex, you look at stags. In Africa you have the lion kingdom, there's a lot of competition, and competition can turn into violence. I'm not recommending it, I'm just saying that it occurs.'²⁰

Angela's belief that elements of violence were inherent in sex led me to ask about sadomasochism – which she viewed as 'not wrong' but a malady that she felt compassion for – and then to broach the subject of rape -

'DG - In terms of the allegory with animals and the 'force' that is used in sex, is there any links between that and rape, and how does that sit with your religious beliefs?

Angela - The allegory is difficult, I don't want to make a big thing of the animal kingdom, but after all we are animals. You seem to think in terms of the male being an

¹⁷ Fisher and Szepter, *Sex Before the Sexual Revolution*, pp.113-162.

¹⁸ Mary, interviewed 02/10/2013.

¹⁹ Angela, interviewed 07/01/2013.

²⁰ Ibid.

aggressor, but I can assure you there's an awful lot of 'come on', 'I'm ready for it' from the female point of view. Particularly lions, the lioness goes out looking for men because she knows she shouldn't mate with her party. What do you think all these hen parties are doing, they're going out, looking for it in our present day culture. These short skirts, what are they doing?'²¹

Angela pointed out that I was assuming a dynamic of male activity and female passivity. She went on to say that -

'This always comes up in rape cases, a judge will say she was looking for it, he paid for her drinks and then she comes on all 'Oh I don't want it' and he feels like he's being short changed. To come back to God's plan in it, if we think of God being like some sort of love, obviously we are programmed, we need a long time to educate and nurture a child. So I think its God's plan to have a stable and loving relationship in order to bring up the next generation.'²²

We see here a marriage of Catholic creationism and Darwinian evolutionary psychology. At the centre of Angela's understanding of sex was the function of procreation and the idea of the 'natural'. The traditionally gendered notions of what Camille Paglia would label 'sexual personae' were premised on this confidence in the profane animalism of human nature.²³

Catholic girls who grew up in a rural setting were habitually exposed to material examples of what they would later understand to be 'the facts of life'. Indeed, 'the facts of life' was a phrase that Angela and a number of other interviewees used repeatedly when discussing their sexual education - 'facts' suggesting an absolute, empirical set of laws governing sexual response. Angela's reflections epitomised an interpretation of human sexuality that ran through many of the interviewees' testimonies. Sex was understood to be a biological phenomenon that worked on what Charles Taylor would call a 'horizontal plane' - a manifestly 'knowable' set of instincts and responses that were removed from the 'vertical' concerns of theological meaning and morality.²⁴ Although Fisher and Szreter's discussion of sexual education in youth and childhood makes passing reference to a 'facts of life' discourse, it did not represent the central trope in their interviewees' narratives that it did in the testimony of my Catholic respondents.²⁵ An emphasis on the natural 'immanence' of sexual knowledge may have been, in part, a reflection of wider societal understandings of sex in the 1940s and 1950s, but it chiefly spoke of a specifically Catholic experience.

²¹ Ibid.

²² Ibid.

²³ C. Paglia, *Sexual Personae: Art and Decadence from Nefertiti to Emily Dickinson*, (Yale, 1990).

²⁴ Taylor, *A Secular Age*, p.706.

²⁵ 'Facts of Life' is a subheading that is used by Fisher and Szreter, but the term is not discussed in any depth – Fisher and Szreter, *Sex Before*, p.63.

The vast majority of the interviewees were of the last generation not to be the target of coordinated Catholic sexual education initiatives. In the middle of the 1960s, a number of manuals and pamphlets were produced by various Catholic authorities with the intention of educating young people. One of the earliest such publication was Choices in Sex written by married couple Quentin and Irene de La Bedoyere. Displayed in Appendix D, the pamphlet's front cover immediately established the light and casual tone in which sex was to be discussed throughout the booklet. Gently satirical cartoons were used to illustrate the points that were made in the text, and small jokes and anecdotes peppered the pamphlet's narrative. The image of the man and woman on the front cover stressed similarities between the genders rather than differences, with the couple sharing comparable haircuts, facial features and heights.²⁶ Mutuality represented a major theme in the text of the pamphlet, and the image of the husband and wife seems to affirm this commitment to gender equality. Martin Richards and Jane Elliot state that 'advice books in the 1960s stressed openness, sharing (mutual orgasms) and closeness in sex' and these themes were replicated in Catholic publications.²⁷ Although continuing to uphold traditional Catholic teachings on the morality of marriage, monogamy and birth control, the form and style with which these messages were communicated to young Catholics were entirely new.²⁸

Choices in Sex and similar sex education publications were not simply the work of individual Catholic authors removed from the Church; they were approved by the clerical hierarchy in the form of an imprimatur (a seal given by a clerical authority which affirmed that a publication accorded with Catholic doctrine). Or at least they were initially. As we saw in the last chapter, Choices in Sex had its Imprimatur removed amid complaints about its content from certain members of the Irish clergy. The pamphlet's author explained that -

‘The main problem that was levelled against the book was in its approach to sexuality. I believe young people are not always in the habit of obeying the rules, and the purpose of Choices in Sex was to get people actually thinking about their own sexual morals.’²⁹

It was this non-didactic approach to sexual morality that was criticised by members of the Catholic Priests Association (CPA), a small clerical society in England and Ireland. Indeed, it is now difficult to comment on the specifics of the Choices in Sex quarrel as it eventually led to a libel case about the Imprimatur process itself.³⁰ Catholic organisations and agencies attempted

²⁶ Q. de la Bedoyere and I. de la Bedoyere, Choices in Sex, (London, 1964).

²⁷ M. Richards and B. Elliot, 'Sex and marriage in the 1960s and 1970s', in D. Clark (ed.), Marriage, Domestic Life and Social Change, (London, 1991) p.37.

²⁸ 'Choices in Sex' included numerous references to popular culture, citing the character *Pussy Galore* for example, from the recently released John Bond film Goldfinger, to illustrate a point about the varying levels of sexual responsiveness in different women.

²⁹ Q. de la Bedoyere, interviewed 20/6/2011.

³⁰ The Catholic Herald, 10th August 1973, p.2.

to police the sexual discourses directed at the young in the 1960s, and the resulting contests moved beyond mere rhetoric in some cases. In this sense, it is clear to see that the internal conflicts that existed within the Catholic community represented significant divisions. As Hugh McLeod has argued, these internal schisms cannot be disregarded when assessing Catholic change in the post-war.³¹ It is also evident though, that these conflicts were not exclusively formulated within the confines of the Catholic world, but were the product of an interaction between secular and religious developments.

Sex education also arrived in Catholic schools at the end of the 1960s. The subject had been touched on in the interviewees' biology lessons before this point, but there was nothing that went beyond a clinical detailing of reproductive mechanics. Wendy, one of the youngest interviewees, was fifteen in 1969 and remembered her Convent school bringing in its first sex education initiative for her year. A married woman addressed the class, answering questions from the students in a question and answer format. Wendy did not know how the woman was qualified for the role beyond her marital status, but remembered her to be a 'glamorous' woman who even smoked a cheroot in their first session (for which she later told the class she had been reprimanded by the head teacher). Wendy pointed out that she did not learn much that she did not know already in the sessions in terms of the bodily processes.³² The advice that was given always accorded with Catholic teachings on sex, marriage and birth control – there was no learning how to put a condom on for example, as there were in corresponding sessions in some non-Catholic schools.³³ The sessions did though open up new avenues of discussion, with questions about the sensuality and feeling of the sexual act alongside more specific questions such as 'can you have sex with a bra on?' This openness was a development from the only other form of sex education that Wendy's school had provided up to this point - a booklet called My Dear Daughter that had been given to her at the age of 10. Wendy remembered it dealt with genital hygiene, informing her:

'Don't imagine that it's wrong to see or touch yourself in this way [when cleaning the labia], just say a prayer to Our Lady afterwards'.³⁴

The sense of guilt and shame that had traditionally coloured Catholic advice on the body was not present in the new sex education initiatives that were emerging by the end of the decade.

A thorough assessment of the impact that these new sex education initiatives had on individual women is beyond the bounds of this thesis' sample. It is likely that, like Wendy, many still

³¹ McLeod, The Religious Crisis, pp.6-30.

³² Wendy, interviewed 15/12/2013.

³³ For a more detailed discussion of what sex education in British schools involved, see L. Hall, 'In Ignorance and in Knowledge: Reflections on the history of Sex Education in Britain', in L. Sauerteig and R. Davidson (eds.), Shaping Sexual Knowledge: A cultural history of sex education in twentieth century Europe, (New York, 2009).

³⁴ Wendy, interviewed 15/12/2013.

garnered sexual knowledge from other sources, as Catholic women had done before such initiatives existed. The initiatives did though reveal much about the way that ‘sexual progress’ was conceptualised within the liberal Catholic movement. Jack Dominian’s book The Church and the Sexual Revolution (1967) saw sexual education as a vital undertaking for the Church. Dominian noted that the advances in the subject of sexuality in the last two centuries had ‘almost entirely occurred outside the Christian tradition and often encountered opposition from it’, listing, ‘sexual education, women’s emancipation, the drive to bring procreation under human control, the psychological and scientific study of sex and an emphasis on the beauty and goodness of sexuality’ as being the principal developments in the field.³⁵ For Dominian, ‘sexual education’ and through this the ‘sexual revolution’ itself, were distinctly secular phenomena which the Church needed to ‘engage with’ or ‘respond to’. Implicit in his definition of sexual education was the idea that a healthy, liberated form of sexuality was somehow foreign to the realm of the religious. This rendering of ‘modern’ sexuality was common to many ‘liberal’ Catholics working in the 1960s, including sex education advocates, CMAC marriage guidance counsellors and members of the Papal Commission.

Consequently, this study of Catholic sexual education in the post-war years has yielded two main conclusions. Firstly, that there was no clear correlation between the form of sexual education received in adolescence and the eventual religious belief system taken up in adulthood. Catholic women growing up in the years immediately surrounding the war drew their sexual education from a range of sites and sources; attributing their views on birth control or sexual morality to this process is misleading. The second conclusion relates to the way sexuality was conceptualised by both the interviewees when remembering their own sexual education and also the new Catholic sexual educators at work in the late 1960s. There existed an underlying commonality between the two. The interviewees viewed their sexual education as a ‘natural’ process – a form of self-revelation in which a hidden, innate force manifested itself. This immanent, natural understanding of human sexuality was equally present in the ‘liberal’ Catholic sex education initiatives that emerged at the end of the 1960s. The idea that sexual knowledge was a scientific, biological area of expertise was resolutely championed by Catholic sexual educators, just as it had been by ‘liberal’ members of the Papal Commission for Birth Control. It seems this discourse has now been firmly established as a dominant way of conceptualising the relationship between sex and religion, shaping the way the interviewees made sense of their own sexual development in early life.

³⁵J. Dominian, The Church and the Sexual Revolution, p.23.

Desire and gender in Catholic adolescence

A dissolution of the gendered codes and expectations that surrounded sexual desire has been identified as an integral feature of post-1960s Christian decline. Callum Brown argues that in response to the disruption of war, a strong connection between femininity and piousness was forged in 1950s Britain to re-stabilise the nation along traditionally gendered lines. The magazines that teenage girls read, the clothes they wore, the music they listened to, the parenting and schooling they received all converged to create a climate in which young women were expected to be chaste, pure and ‘good’ –

‘they were still expected to seek their femininity from a religious-based coda which, however liberated from conversionism, was still tied to an evangelical vision of the ‘good woman’’.³⁶

Central to this culture was the idea that female sexual desire was to be mistrusted and suppressed –

‘By the 1950s organised Christianity had become characterised by the support of a harsh and vindictive state apparatus that oppressed many pleasures without reason, and hurt the lives of many young people – especially women and gays’.³⁷

According to Brown, the 1960s witnessed a revolutionary shift as the connection between femininity and piousness was decisively severed, leaving women free to express sexual desire in an open and healthy way. To some extent, the testimony of the interviewees bore out Brown’s model. They spoke of the importance of ‘purity’ and ‘goodness’ being impressed upon them in their upbringings during the 1940s and 1950s. They also spoke of becoming increasingly conscious of their relative naivety when compared with boys and also non-Catholic girls. There were though mixed interpretations of this innocence. Some interviewees saw it as a form of oppression that denied them healthy sexual expression - an interpretation that corroborated Brown’s picture of ‘pious femininity’. Others however looked back on the period with wistful nostalgia, lamenting the loss of a time when the complications and troubles of sex did not exist. This section examines the gendered responsibilities and expectations that were attached to the development, negotiation and management of pre-marital sexual desires. The interviewees’ memories of their early lives were shaped by subsequent experiences, but this should not be seen to undermine the historical value of their testimony. Retrospection affords us a privileged insight into the way memory and experience interact in the production of meaning.

³⁶ Brown, *The Death of Christian*, p.87.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 200.

All the interviewees bar Michaela (who no longer identified as a Catholic believer by her late teens) did not have sexual relations of any kind before their marriage.³⁸ Amidst the plethora of debates and discussions that surrounded the Catholic Church and its approach to sex in the twentieth century, the prohibition of pre-marital sex was never really questioned. The interviewees largely accorded with the Church's line on pre-marital sexuality. We saw in the last chapter how Teresa and her partner had great difficulties with their sexual relationship, but she still subscribed to the Church's teaching on the sanctity of marriage -

'I mean sex before marriage was an absolute no no, and we all accepted that, we thought it was wrong, so if you're a Catholic that wasn't an issue'

'I haven't changed my mind on that. The sanctity of marriage and all that, it makes sense. If you believe in a Catholic God, I think you believe that sex is sacred and reserved for marriage'³⁹

Three interviewees did express dissent on the question of pre-marital sex. Sorcha for example spoke of the importance of 'knowing your partner physically' before marriage. She explained that without this fore-knowledge, a couple would have to go through a period of 'working out how sexually active you were going to be with someone'.⁴⁰ Her concerns for 'sexual compatibility' were not common amongst the interviewees though. Sex and marriage were generally considered to be tethered by a divine providence that overrode any need for bodily familiarity.

Resisting the temptation to have sex before marriage was more difficult for some Catholic women than others; those courting non-Catholic men had to justify their beliefs to their sometimes less than sympathetic partners. Patricia recalled having to explain to a man she was seeing of 'no particular faith' that she did not care what he thought he could offer her, 'it had to beat eternal salvation'.⁴¹ None of the interviewees spoke of feeling a pressure that they were uncomfortable with, and it should be noted that Patricia's man of 'no particular faith' made his case based on the pleasure he believed Patricia would experience. Even in all-Catholic couples though, the responsibility for maintaining a state of chastity worked along distinctly gendered lines. A number of the interviewees remembered having to come up with new and inventive ways of keeping their partners' advances at bay. At the age of eighteen Penny started courting her eventual husband Harry – she recalled the 'alone time' they shared when she visited him in his naval barracks -

³⁸ Michaela, interviewed 07/04/2013.

³⁹ Teresa, interviewed 04/04/2012.

⁴⁰ Sorcha, interviewed 09/01/2014.

⁴¹ Patricia, interviewed 03/05/2013.

‘When we were getting a little too amorous, I would pull on his ear. Gently, you know, as a joke, but to say ‘stop there’. That was our tactic for keeping ourselves in check....I knew that was my job and so did he. I quite liked it, it was like a little game we played.’⁴²

There were some exceptions to these gendered responsibilities. Teresa recalled that resisting sexual urges was as much her eventual husband Michael’s prerogative as it was her own -

‘DG – Were you excited about the prospect of sex?

Teresa - Well yes you get all sorts of sexual feelings when you’re courting, we had to pull back at times.

DG – Was it more your responsibility to do this, the pulling back, or a mutual thing?

Teresa - No it was a mutual thing. Our faith was important to both of us, we were both regular, we were both traditional Catholics as it would be described then, you know, we were both regular Sunday mass goers...’⁴³

Teresa was a rare interviewee who did not feel in some way that it was more her than her partner’s responsibility to maintain the couples’ chastity. This responsibility was not always viewed as a burden by Catholic women – for some it represented a sense of empowerment while for others like Penny it was remembered as a playful negotiation of gender roles.

The gendered expectations that surrounded the maintenance of pre-marital chastity were not new to adolescent Catholic girls, but a continuation of the sexual climate they had grown up in. Catholic girls growing up before the 1960s were generally expected to be pure, innocent and uninformed when it came to sexual matters. Lynn spoke passionately about how the notion of female sexual desire was actively suppressed in her childhood -

‘In the fifties when I was brought up, sex wasn’t mentioned, ok, the idea of the Catholic girl was to be pure, and pure meant not to have any ideas about sex, the word didn’t even come... pure meant virgin, that was what it meant, so the sin against purity was to have sex. We couldn’t even read novels, ‘dangerous reading’ ... so I couldn’t even read novels like Madame Bovary’

‘Not just sexual, passion, I mean the idea that was really kept away from us was that a woman could be passionate and could physically enjoy sex. That was not on. So

⁴² Penny, interviewed 28/07/2013.

⁴³ Teresa, interviewed 04/04/2012.

anybody, a married woman enjoying sex... the idea was not acceptable. I mean girls were not told that there was something in it for them'⁴⁴

Lynn's depiction of 1950s Catholicism corroborated Brown's analysis of Christian womanhood. As Mary Eaton has detailed, Catholic girls were encouraged to think of themselves as the 'children of Mary', with an associated emphasis on virginal purity.⁴⁵ Marian devotion was a central aspect of the interviewees' religious upbringing, but was often a source of consternation at a later stage in their life

'Anne - I look at Mary now, and I think, this right here is the problem with the Catholic Church. Why does she need to be a virgin? I feel very uncomfortable about her position now'⁴⁶

As we have seen, it was not until the middle of the 1960s that the central Catholic hierarchy engaged with the idea of female sexual pleasure, as lay Papal Commission members, CMAC counsellors and Catholic sex manual authors worked to relay the values of a 'sexual revolution' culture to a Catholic audience. Catholic girls going through adolescence before this time were taught that sexual desire was itself an unfeminine sensation; sex had nothing 'in it for them'.

The image of Hell was central to the gendered understandings of sexual morality that were impressed on young Catholics in the 1940s and 1950s. Rosie spoke of the guilt she felt as she began to have 'fantasies' in her teenage years - she was taught to believe that to think about sex was a sin in itself -

'Rosie - We were burdened with this instruction about impurity and how wrong it was, and it was always a serious sin we were told, you were going to Hell! I'm sure that my husband had no idea that I was worrying about things like that, because I never told him, I'm sure he never had thoughts like that at all

DG – As in a fear of hell?

Rosie - Yes, although he'd been educated in a monastery, but men are different. They didn't get the same guilt placed upon them when it came to sex.'⁴⁷

Michaela saw both sex and ceasing to believe in Hell as crucial aspects of her disaffiliation as a teenage girl -

⁴⁴ Lynn, interviewed 12/04/2012.

⁴⁵ M. Eaton, 'What became of the children of Mary?' in M. Hornsby-Smith (ed.), *Catholics in England 1950-2000* (London, 1999) p.220. Also see A. Harris, *Faith in the Family*, pp.130-201.

⁴⁶ Anne, interviewed 24/03/2012.

⁴⁷ Rosie, interviewed 11/09/2012.

‘As a child it was quite scary really, very clear threats and consequences of doing wrong which was particularly directed at girls. My brother never got the same sort of thing. I remember very clearly that the whole business about purgatory, I can’t remember what the word is, but you get time off purgatory, you could do Stations of the Cross seven times, you know, say certain prayers and you’d have less time in purgatory. And it seemed ridiculous eventually.’⁴⁸

If Hell disappeared in the 1960s as Lodge claimed, then this was perhaps more of a relief for Catholic women than for Catholic men. Their sexual upbringing had been punctuated by regular and persistent threats of eternal damnation.

Kate Fisher’s oral history research suggests that the maintenance of an uninformed, innocent feminine persona may not have been specific to Catholics in the 1950s, but a part of a wider sexual culture. She shows how women, particularly working class women, worked to uphold the appearance of ignorance when it came to things like contraceptive knowledge, in an attempt to maintain their ‘passive’ feminine identity.⁴⁹ However, the interviewees were eager to stress that their Catholicism set them apart from their peers in this respect. Sorchia remembered being aware of her ‘difference’ from non-Catholics in her school days, but not fully realising the extent of her ‘innocence’ until university –

‘DG - Were you conscious at the time of being more innocent than other non-Catholic girls?

Sorchia - Oh yes, yes definitely, going to university was quite a shock, I was not really mature at seventeen, not your average maturity. I think that was quite a feature of girls going to Catholic schools... single sex Catholic schools anyway. I was immediately much more aware that some people were much more sexually aware and promiscuous than me. My room-mate was so much more mature, I was quite threatened by her. I didn’t really discuss sex issues with her, she seemed on a different planet really when it came to that’⁵⁰

The interviewees who did go to university were thrown abruptly into a new and challenging sexual culture, but were also exposed to new practical opportunities for meeting boys and pursuing sexual activities. Those who did not go to university tended to continue living at home which held limited opportunities for meeting boys. Whether attending university or not though, the interviewees became increasingly aware in their teenage years that their Catholic upbringings had set them apart from non-Catholics when it came to matters of sex.

⁴⁸ Michaela, Interviewed 07/04/2013.

⁴⁹ Fisher, *Sex Marriage and Birth Control*, pp.26 -75.

⁵⁰ Sorchia, interviewed 09/01/2014.

Sorcha recalled that she did feel ‘physical desires awakening in her’ during her school days, but that she did not articulate these thoughts to anyone else, even her close friends. In an attempt to get the interviewees thinking about the development of their early sexual desires, I asked them about whether they had a favourite Beatle -

‘DG- Did you have a favourite Beatle?’

Sorcha - Yes I thought the Beatles were quite exciting, definitely. I wasn’t the sort of teenager who fell in love with pop stars – some of my friends were like that. I did like dancing though. But I didn’t talk much about sex with friends. I can remember hardly any discussions with my friends about sexuality.’⁵¹

Sorcha went on to reflect on her friendship groups’ lack of discussion about sex-

‘It’s amazing we did have discussions about all kinds but I didn’t even with my close friends talk about what they actually did on the sexual front, which is a bit strange really. .. It was more being aware... we had a close nit group of five friends – all Catholics bar one... I didn’t actually discuss it, that’s really weird.’⁵²

Sorcha’s judgement that not speaking about sex was ‘really weird’ reveals much about contemporary constructions of sexual normality. Foucault spoke of a prevailing ‘incitement to discourse’ taking hold in modernity; individuals are now constantly encouraged to ‘speak sex’ according to Foucault.⁵³ Many Catholic women now look back on the silences that defined their early sexual development as an anachronism, as something at odds with their present-day understanding of healthy sexual expression. However, it is important not to make assumptions about the moral evaluation Sorcha was making when she used the terms ‘strange’ and ‘weird’. There was an ambivalence communicated with these expressions, even a sense of nostalgia. Later in the interview Sorcha was to explain that her youthful innocence was not something she resented, but a ‘vital ingredient of a very happy period in her life’.⁵⁴

The mood and tone that accompanied the interviewees’ recollections of their youthful innocence spoke of the way this life-cycle stage was remembered retrospectively but also experienced at the time. A telling case was Teresa, whom we met in the last chapter when discussing the difficulties she experienced with NFP. She spoke candidly about her own naivety –

‘I was a real goody goody, I was very law abiding (chuckles).’

⁵¹ Ibid.

⁵² Ibid.

⁵³ Foucault, *The History of Sexuality*, pp.17-35.

⁵⁴ Sorcha, interviewed 09/01/2014.

‘We used to have a Palais. Generally young people. Talk about innocence abroad, to say we were naïve is an understatement (chuckles). It was all... jiving - that was very adventurous! The boys were over there, the girls on the other side.... I mean we were very sheltered, very sheltered.’⁵⁵

When she spoke of meeting her eventual husband Michael at university, her testimony was peppered with giggles and laughter at the innocence of their early courtship. She spoke affectionately of them meeting at the Catholic chaplaincy and the rigid formalities of their early relationship.⁵⁶ Her laughter expressed the peculiarity of their sexual innocence, but also the warmth with which she viewed it now. There was a distinct break in the tone of Teresa’s interview that can be pinned down to a particular question. Up to this point in the interview, she had responded to questions about her pre-marital life in a light, jovial manner –

‘DG- So we’ll move on to talk about sex in your marriage. Can you talk about the experience of using NFP?’

Teresa – [Sigh and long pause] Yes well, we’ve used it all our lives and I think it’s just ... [breaks into tears]⁵⁷

For the remainder of the interview, Teresa moved between sorrow, anger and remorse as she recalled her years of marital sexuality. Put simply, the subject of sex brought tears. The experience of using NFP had undoubtedly affected the way she evaluated her youthful innocence, but this should not be seen to undermine the value of her testimony. Teresa’s mood when recalling her adolescence should not simply be dismissed as nostalgia, but viewed as an indicator of the way she and many other women of her generation experienced this life-cycle stage. Many of the interviewees communicated a sense of warmth, even longing for the sexual innocence of their upbringing. Their light and uninhibited tone when recalling this period was in direct contrast to the despondency present when discussing sex.

Brown’s rendering of ‘pious femininity’ placed power in the hands of central authorities such as the Church and the state, casting individual women as inert victims of social control.⁵⁸ There has though, been a move to challenge this reading of gendered power dynamics in the historiography of mid-twentieth century England. The key contribution that Kate Fisher’s oral history research made to the historiography of pre-1960s sexual politics was in reasserting the agency of working class women in marital relations. Her interviewees viewed their passivity as

⁵⁵ Teresa, interviewed 04/04/2012.

⁵⁶ Ibid.

⁵⁷ Ibid.

⁵⁸ Brown, *The Death of Christian*, p.87.

an active choice rather than being imposed upon them by the various forces of patriarchy.⁵⁹ The participants in my oral history research did not always remember their youthful innocence as an active choice, but often worked to discredit the idea that it was imposed upon them –

‘This idea that we were poor little girls being forced into our white dresses. As I said, I knew that girls at other schools were different, they would talk about sexy things and dress differently, but I didn’t want that. It was not for me. And I was very happy waiting for things like that.’⁶⁰

Another interviewee spoke of the kind of man she wanted to marry as a teenage girl –

‘Well to be honest, when I was a teenager girl I wanted the man I was with to want me to be ... you know, wholesome. Someone who valued that in a woman. That’s the sort of man I wanted to marry ...and did!’⁶¹

Just as the interviewees were eager to stress the agency they exercised in contraceptive decisions during marriage, they equally presented their youthful ‘innocence’ as something that they played a role in constructing. Catholic women’s early sexual development in the 1950s was shaped by ‘pious’ expectations, but this did not always amount to the form of subjugation that Brown described.⁶²

The interviewees’ memories of early sexual development revealed a complex interplay between ideological structures and their own sense of autonomy, as well as an acute awareness of how this interplay might be interpreted by ‘others’ in a contemporary setting. Questions of coercion and control were clearly at the forefront of their and my consciousness when discussing the sexual desire of young Catholic women. Following this line, the next section delves deeper into the way the interviewees’ understandings and experiences of Catholicism in their early lives were affected by external interpretations of religious belief. In a post-war setting, the relationship between Catholicism and notions of immaturity was to receive unprecedented levels of attention from secular intellectual actors, reshaping the way early life was experienced and understood for many Catholics in England.

Religiosity and infantilism

In the decades after the Second World War, childhood became endowed with a new and augmented significance in popular and academic thinking about religion. As Michal Shapira and

⁵⁹ Fisher, *Sex Marriage and Birth Control*, pp.238-244.

⁶⁰ Patricia interviewed 03/05/2013.

⁶¹ Doreen, interviewed 11/08/2012.

⁶² Brown, *The Death of Christian*, p.87.

Matthew Thomson have shown, understandings of childhood in general underwent unprecedented changes in the middle of the century.⁶³ The emotional legacy of Total War, coupled with the infiltration of psychoanalytical modes of understanding, worked to recalibrate perceptions of infantile selfhood. Erik Erikson extended Freud's 'developmental theory' in his work of 1950 Childhood and Society, identifying childhood as a determinative stage in the 'psychosocial development' of religious identities.⁶⁴ In the same year, Erich Fromm published Psychoanalysis and Religion which argued that religion primarily constituted a childish desire to remain attached to protecting figures.⁶⁵ Together, these works of popular psychoanalysis, aimed at a wider, non-academic readership, encapsulated the tethering of religion and childhood. They were informed and informed by an ascendant understanding of religion that affected the way Catholic institutions and individuals thought of their own beliefs, identities and approaches to parenthood. This section examines how dominant constructions of infantilism and childhood intersected with personal Catholic religiosities. In this sense, it deals with early life more as a theme and social category than a lived life-cycle stage.

For ease of communication, the deterministic association between religious belief and childhood that has been sketched here will be referred to as the 'infantilism hypothesis'. It was, of course, a collection of diffuse, evolving and sometimes contradicting concepts rather than a unified theory, but at its centre was the idea that childhood played a determinative role in the construction of religious identities. The infantilism hypothesis took the form of two related indictments in the interviews – firstly, that early religious beliefs were merely the product of psychological indoctrination and therefore less 'legitimate' than beliefs held in adulthood. Secondly, that personal religiosity was itself a 'childish' phenomenon. The interviewees' memories of their early religious development worked within, around and against the infantilism hypothesis. It was an almost unavoidable discourse for the interviewees when making sense of their religious beliefs, particularly their beliefs on sexual morality, in the early stages of their lives. I am not interested in evaluating the intrinsic validity of the infantilism hypothesis. Instead, the intention here is to explore how it affected and continues to affect the religious identities of Catholic women in post-war England.

The idea that childhood theological beliefs were somehow less authentic than those held in adulthood was present in the testimony of Michaela, the interviewee who rejected her Catholic identity in her late teenage years. This was her response when I asked if she had ever truly believed in a Catholic God –

⁶³ Shapira, The War Inside, pp.170-197, M. Thomson, Lost Freedom: The Landscape of the Child, pp.1-20.

⁶⁴ E. Erikson, Childhood and Society, (Great Britain, 1951).

⁶⁵ E. Fromm, Psychoanalysis and Religion, (New York, 1950).

‘That’s the thing, I don’t know if I can remember. I used to pray, there was a dialogue, but did I truly believe in a God? Thing is you don’t know what you’re doing as a child. I was just doing as I was told. It’s difficult to separate that from what you actually thought yourself’⁶⁶

As well as showing an awareness of the potential frailties of her own memory here, Michaela was grappling with the question of agency in childhood. At a number of points in the interview she asked whether she was a suitable participant for the research as she could not be sure whether she was ever a ‘proper Catholic’.⁶⁷ A handful of other interviewees also questioned the authenticity of their Catholic beliefs at an early stage of their life. They spoke of ‘following the rules’ or ‘being spoon-fed’ their beliefs, a language that was rooted in the idea that children were particularly vulnerable to religious indoctrination.⁶⁸

Some of the interviewees explicitly reflected on the connection between religious belief and childhood. Angela adopted elements of the infantilism hypothesis in the construction of her life story but ultimately showed an ambivalence towards it. She asserted that the ‘childish mind is very receptive’ when speaking of her own religious upbringing, and maintained that her beliefs had not had any ‘sound philosophical basis’ until she went to university -

‘I found out that far from being a childish irrelevant distraction, it was a very serious matter. It had given rise to a lot of philosophy, art, history; it’s all connected with religion’⁶⁹

She downplayed the legitimacy of her early Catholic beliefs – it was not until she had gained the ‘enlightenment’ offered by the work of Rousseau, Kierkegaard and other works of philosophy that her Catholicism took on its ‘full meaning’.⁷⁰ This way of interpreting religious belief was one that accorded with the basic tenets of the infantilism hypothesis. At the same time, Angela recognised the way this hypothesis had contributed to the denigration of religious faith -

‘I learnt my religion as an adult, rather than having it spoon fed to me as a child. Which is one of the main reasons I think people throw away their religion because they regard it as childish.’⁷¹

Angela went beyond commenting on how childhood had been viewed as a determinative stage in religious development and detailed how in reciprocation, religious belief had become understood as ‘childish’ in nature. In this way, she connected the two indictments of the

⁶⁶ Michaela, interviewed 07/04/2013.

⁶⁷ Ibid.

⁶⁸ Angela, interviewed 07/01/2014, Rosie, interviewed 11/09/2014.

⁶⁹ Angela, interviewed 07/01/2014.

⁷⁰ Ibid.

⁷¹ Ibid.

infantilism hypothesis, recognising its impact on collective devotion but still subscribing to its reading of early religiosity at a personal level.

Many of the interviewees expressly resisted the dual indictments of the infantilism hypothesis -

‘I know there are people who will tell you that a child has no ability to decide for itself. I heard Christopher Hitchens, you know, good friend of Richard Dawkins, I heard him saying it should be illegal to teach someone about religion until the age of 13... what he called the age of reason’⁷²

Doreen’s reference to the more militant form of secularism represented by public figures like Richard Dawkins and Christopher Hitchens underlined her awareness of the link between religious decline and the infantilism hypothesis. She went on to emphasise her own agency when describing her Catholic upbringing -

‘Well I was questioning things from an early age – that was my father that really encouraged the questioning. My beliefs changed as I did, they weren’t simply set in stone or forced on to me. Or they weren’t any more than they might be right now!’⁷³

Like Doreen, a number of the interviewees explicitly acknowledged the dominance of the infantilism hypothesis and worked to contradict it in the interview. Georgina observed that -

‘There is this idea these days that Catholics must have been indoctrinated as children. Why is it when it comes to religion it is always indoctrination? Well my faith is no different from someone else’s beliefs about right and wrong. It was made up of decisions then just as it is now. I chose to follow Catholic ways on sex, to wait until marriage, and I was very happy’⁷⁴

The interviewees’ ardour to respond to the indictments of the infantilism hypothesis may have been encouraged by my own presence – an academic researcher looking to analyse religious belief. This notwithstanding, the way they worked to stress their own youthful agency was a sign of its salience in contemporary Catholic consciousness.

Georgina made a point of emphasising that her beliefs on sexual morality in particular were active choices rather than products of childhood indoctrination. Her decision to focus on questions of sex when counteracting the infantilism hypothesis was replicated by many of interviewees. In the third chapter on later marriage, we saw how the orthodox interviewee Elizabeth critiqued the notion of ‘female emancipation’, maintaining that she had always ‘felt

⁷² Doreen, interviewed 11/08/2012.

⁷³ Ibid.

⁷⁴ Georgina, interviewed 22/11/2012.

free' to 'choose my boyfriends, husband, lived independently from age eighteen, treasured my virginity until marriage, never used contraception.'⁷⁵ The interviewees were conscious that their beliefs on sexual morality in particular were vulnerable to the pathological diagnoses of the infantilism hypothesis. In a post-liberationist culture, Catholic beliefs on the body were increasingly identified as the paragon of religion's psychological bankruptcy. Elizabeth's comments underlined the way that dominant constructions of 'sexual liberation' were often premised on psychoanalytical definitions of sex, childhood and individual autonomy.

Doreen was right that Hitchens had called for 'religious instruction' to be denied until a child had 'attained the age of reason'.⁷⁶ Positioning 'reason' as the counterpoint to religious belief characterised a form of 'enlightenment secularism' which can be traced back to the eighteenth century. Mapping this on to childhood however, was a typically post-Freudian critique of religion. As Matthew Thomson has demonstrated, it was not until the middle of the twentieth century that psychoanalytical interpretations of childhood began to take hold in the popular domain.⁷⁷ With this, the concept of the immature mind was readily applied to religious belief, reshaping personal and prescriptive approaches to the religious development of the young.

What impact then did the infantilism hypothesis have on the interviewees' approach to parenting, specifically the sexual instruction they provided to their offspring? Moreover, what can this approach tell us about the way they conceptualised the future? Of the twenty six interviewees, nineteen said at least one of their children continued to identify as Catholic, but only eight had a child who attended Mass every week. Even fewer had grandchildren who regularly attended Mass, regardless of their age. Although this seems to loosely mirror the changing character of Catholic devotional practice that Hornsby-Smith described, the size of the sample means that reliable conclusions cannot be drawn from these figures.⁷⁸ I am more interested in the interviewees' personal interpretations of these generational discrepancies and what they can tell us about the shifting relationship between Catholic belief and childhood in the post-war.

Some interviewees lamented their offspring's rejection of traditional forms of Catholic worship. Elizabeth thought it a 'great shame' that her daughter, who still 'strongly identified' as a Catholic, did not 'feel the importance of the Catholic Mass'.⁷⁹ Elizabeth said she regularly prayed for a turnaround on this front. She was eager to see her daughter and her family find a 'nice local church' when they moved house later in the year – she even encouraged her to move

⁷⁵ Elizabeth, interviewed 15/07/2013.

⁷⁶ C. Hitchens, *God Is Not Great*, (New York, 2007) pp.217-228.

⁷⁷ M. Thomson, *Lost Freedom: The Landscape of the Child at the British Post-war Settlement*, (Oxford, 2013).

⁷⁸ M. Hornsby-Smith, *Roman Catholic Beliefs in England*, p.60.

⁷⁹ Elizabeth, interviewed 15/07/2013.

to a certain area because she knew the parish priest there.⁸⁰ Other interviewees were less concerned with their offspring's lack of church attendance. Angela described her grandchildren as 'solidly Catholic', but said almost all of them did not attend Church every week. She did not have a problem with this though -

'It's for the older generations to spend their times on their knees, the young have better things to do, they need to experience things.'⁸¹

There is then some evidence of a generational break in the devotional practices of the interviewees and their offspring in terms of mass attendance. However, the clearest distinction between the interviewees' generation and that of their offspring (both their children and their grandchildren) was in their beliefs and early instruction on contraceptive morality. Only two interviewees thought that their children had used NFP in their marriages, one of whom could not be sure as they had never discussed the issue. Every other interviewee felt certain that their children had practised artificial means of contraception during their marriages. This knowledge was sometimes gleaned from open discussions with their sons and daughters, but more often than not was assumed because of birth spacing.

The interviewees' attitudes towards their children's beliefs on contraception, both at the point of interview but also when bringing up their children, reveal much about the way sex and religion have been categorised since the 1960s. Perhaps unsurprisingly, the 'liberal' interviewees were happy to see their children disregarding the Church's teaching –

'Oh no, they don't have to go through any of the struggles that I went through. I wouldn't wish it on my worst enemy ... and I think their faith will be all the better for that!'⁸²

Some interviewees spoke of expressly teaching their children about artificial means, others 'left them to their own devices'. Either way, their children were brought up to see contraception as a matter of 'individual conscience'. The Church's teaching on the matter was either an irrelevance, or something to be actively warned against. The 'liberal' form of Catholicism which they had worked to construct in the course of their lives, with its active compartmentalisation of questions relating to sex and contraception, was the starting point for the next generation's religious upbringing.

The orthodox interviewees' opinions of their children's contraceptive practice were less expected. Although Elizabeth bemoaned her daughter's disenchantment with traditional forms

⁸⁰ Ibid.

⁸¹ Angela, interviewed 07/01/2014.

⁸² Anne, interviewed 24/03/2012.

of Catholic devotion such as weekly Mass attendance (and worked hard to redress this situation), she accepted her disobedience of the Church's teaching on contraception -

'Elizabeth - Yes I find it in my own children [use of artificial means].

DG - Did you teach them about the Church's teaching on contraception when they grew up?

Elizabeth - No. I think they knew we didn't practice artificial contraception, but it was not our place to intervene in their bodies. It's up to them. There's one, the middle boy, who I think practices the faith'⁸³

Elizabeth reaffirmed her belief that 'practising the faith' meant keeping to the Church's teaching on contraception, but unlike other matters of Catholic morality, did not instruct her children on the subject. Her attitude epitomised a popular emphasis on individual 'conscience' that had developed in Catholic thinking about contraception since the 1970s, as well as a continuing reticence to discuss sexual matters within the family. Indeed, Lesley Hall has shown that this reticence was a feature of wider familial relations throughout the twentieth century.⁸⁴ This notwithstanding, Elizabeth and the other 'orthodox' interviewees' attitudes towards their children's contraceptive behaviour was indicative of the way questions of sex were increasingly seen to be removed from other aspects of Catholic belief.

Bridget, also an avowedly orthodox interviewee, went beyond an acceptance of her children's use of artificial means and openly applauded it. We have seen how in the course of our interview, Bridget reformed her position on birth control, acceding by the end that she would have been 'happy if *Humanae Vitae* had been different'⁸⁵ She was also 'very happy' that her children, all still Catholic believers, had not adhered to the Church's teaching on birth control.⁸⁶ Bridget provided her children with clear moral instruction that accorded with the Catholic doctrine in all areas apart from questions of sex. Near the end of the interview, she reflected on the generational nature of 'sexual liberation' -

'I think we who were born just before the outbreak of World War Two were quite a bit different to those born after World War Two. They had more choices, some of which were sexual liberation. The young people of my generation, we were expected to obey. We didn't know any different. Then we saw gradually the increased licence in every area ... those that had been through the war had been through privation and hardship,

⁸³ Elizabeth, interviewed 15/07/2013.

⁸⁴ L. Hall, 'In Ignorance and in Knowledge.', in L. Sauerteig and R. Davidson (eds.), *Shaping Sexual Knowledge*, p.22.

⁸⁵ Bridget, interviewed 16/04/2013.

⁸⁶ Ibid.

and knew what it was like to feel like you could die at any moment ...so it's a natural reaction to want to give your children not only greater material, but also greater freedom.'⁸⁷

In seeing the War as a point of generational partition, Bridget's testimony affirmed elements of Brown's model of sexual change. For Brown, it was the 'baby boom' generation who were to cast off the shackles of Christian prudishness that had tied down their parents.⁸⁸ However, we get here an idea of 'youth', and indeed 'sexual liberation', being a licensed thing - not simply a breaking away from traditional values but something that was tolerated and even encouraged by the parental generation. This is not to say that the interviewees' children's religious identities were determined by the parenting they received any more or less than any other generation, but that this parenting was itself a signifier of significant cultural changes in dominant understandings of sex and religion. The interviewees' memories in general suggested a more gradual transition in femininity than Brown's model of 'sudden and abrupt' revolution. While a generational shift is clearly discernible, the movement away from piousness was not viewed as a violent rebellion driven by the counter-cultural forces of sixties permissiveness, but a subtler reworking of the moral and existential values around the body.

Lynn Abrams' oral history study of mid-century Christian femininity suggests that a generational change in approaches to religious parenting was not limited to Catholicism. Her research showed that the 'mothers' of the post-war generation, which loosely correlated to the mothers of my interviewees, often deployed religious discourse to criticise the new form of femininity that their daughters were constructing. Sexual morality in particular was an area that the 'mothers' felt compelled to intervene in, with this generation offering perspectives and advice that drew on traditional Christian ideals of chastity and monogamy.⁸⁹ Abrams found that the post-war generation by contrast were far less likely to pass judgment or offer religious instruction in the area of sexual morality when bringing up their own children in the 1960s and beyond. The parental behaviour of this generation of 'daughters' chimes with that of Bridget and many of my interviewees. Their approach to childrearing reflected the ascendancy of psychological values around 'personal autonomy' and 'individual conscience' when it came to matters of sex, as well as a growing belief that religious instruction represented a 'neurotic' obstacle to these principles. The ethics of the body was no longer considered a legitimate subject for religious inculcation.

⁸⁷ Ibid.

⁸⁸ Brown, *Death of Christian*, p.183.

⁸⁹ L. Abrams, 'Mother and Daughters: Negotiating the Discourse on the 'Good Woman' in 1950s and 1960s Britain', in N. Christie and M. Gauvreau (eds.) *The Sixties and Beyond: Dechristianization in North America and Western Europe, 1945-2000*, (Canada, 2013) pp.60-83.

Abrams interprets the retreat of 'Christian moral systems around the body' as amounting to an emancipation of the self; 'the 'post-war generation – the daughters - were beginning to develop a form of independent selfhood so characteristic of the modern West, which has been described as predicated on ...time and space for oneself, and a sense of ownership of one's body, all of which conflicted with traditional Christian discourse on ideal womanhood.'⁹⁰ As such, her story of generational change accorded with her husband Callum Brown's narrative of individual liberation, as English women took control of their own bodily process and fashioned a 'modern', autonomous form of selfhood. When speaking of their approach to parenting, my interviewees confirmed elements of this discourse, but also highlighted a different set of forces at work. I pressed the orthodox interviewees as to why they worked hard to bring up their children within a firmly Catholic moral code, but were happy to let them take a different path when it came to sex. The way Lydia set out her rationale was particularly revealing -

'Well sex is just a different question these days. It's a concrete, natural ... thing isn't it, you can't impose airy ideas on that, and that's what religion really is, isn't it, ideas.'⁹¹

The disjuncture between the body as an object and religious belief as a concept was one that underpinned many of the interviewees' decisions to remove the topic of sex from their religious parenting. Brown and Abrams' tale of shifting power-dynamics, of a movement from dogmatic coercion to individual autonomy, can be viewed on a different axis when the ontologies of sex and religion are foregrounded in historical analysis.

The interviewees approach to parenting clearly held little regard for the indictments of the infantilism hypothesis and its disapproval of religious instruction for the young, but adhered to this principle when it came to sex. At one level, this approach to parenting was a consequence of the Church's teaching on contraception not being deemed 'infallible', as well as the stigma that still surrounded sexual subjects in many family homes. However, it also represented a deeper schism that had emerged in the relationship between sex and religion. Catholic women's experience of married life in the post-war years had encouraged them to think of the body as distinctly 'this-worldly'; an object that was somehow removed from other aspects of Catholic morality. It was this idea, above and beyond any other, that underpinned their approach to religious parenting.

The discrepancy between the interviewees' upbringing and that of their children and grandchildren was perhaps the most palpable indication of the break between sex and religion that this thesis has described. Growing up in the years immediately surrounding the War, the interviewees' early sexual development was closely regulated by religious codes and ideals. By

⁹⁰ Abrams, 'Mother and Daughters: Negotiating the Discourse on the 'Good Woman', p.69.

⁹¹ Lydia, interviewed 20/03/2013.

the time the interviewees were bringing up their own children, few looked to Catholicism as a source of guidance for parenting when it came to matters of sex. Informed by the ascendancy of the infantilism hypothesis, many considered religious instruction to be an obstruction to young peoples' 'natural' sexual development. Just as had been the case in the rejection of the confessional, when it came to matters of sexual instruction Catholic women increasingly distrusted transcendental answers to what were understood to be immanent questions. Brown insisted that this generational divide amounted to the death of a traditional form of coercive Christianity, as the advent of 'post-modernity' shattered the concrete certainties on which religious authority had been based before the 1960s.⁹² As we have seen, personal Catholic religiosities certainly changed shape in the decades after the war. But this break was as much about ontology as it was personal autonomy. The close interconnection between understandings of faith and the human body which had been so central to the upbringing of Catholic women in the years either side of the war had been largely dissolved by the last decades of the century. Catholicism continued to be lived, practiced and believed throughout the post-war period; its relationship with sex would never be the same.

Conclusion

The main conclusion of this chapter is one that might be called a 'negative conclusion' in critical theory. Early life was not the determinative life-cycle stage in Catholic women's sexual and religious development that certain intellectual authorities have thought it to be.⁹³ Their contraceptive decisions, sexual behaviour and religious identities were not rooted in the experiences of childhood or adolescence, but formed and reformed at different stages throughout their lives. At the same time, it is clear that childhood provided an important context for the interviewees' marital experiences. It was the point at which understandings of gender, desire and sexuality started to interact with their religious beliefs and identities. Treating early life as a constitutive rather than determinative stage allows us to see how Catholic women 'lived forwards', as Kierkegaard would have it, even if academic investigators often insist on understanding their lives backwards. The causal connection between religious beliefs and infantilism, popularised by psychoanalytical writers in the middle of the twentieth century, continues to affect intellectual and personal understandings of Catholic devotion. It represented an unavoidable presence for the interviewees when composing their life stories and also in their day-to-day living.

⁹² Brown, *The Death of Christian*, p.244.

⁹³ For example E. Erikson, *Childhood and Society*, (Great Britain, 1951), C. Hitchens, *God Is Not Great*, (New York, 2007) pp.217-228.

The question of autonomy has continually been applied to young Catholic girls. The interviewees' early sexual development was often shaped by codes of passivity and piety, but this was not always experienced or interpreted retrospectively as a form of subjugation. Many of the interviewees saw this feminine identity as an active choice, one that was increasingly denied to them in their married lives. Their testimony emphasised the agency that they exercised in forming and living out these identities. Similarly, the limited sex education the interviewees received from formal authorities encouraged them to seek out new and highly individual sources of sexual knowledge. In some ways, Catholic girls going through adolescence after the 1960s were to have their sex lives directed by external authorities to a greater extent than those of the generation before them. The values, ideals and language that made up this direction changed significantly though, as emergent Catholic educators worked to engage with a liberationist construction of sexual wellbeing. Power continued to operate in the construction of young, Catholic sexualities, but operated in a new and essentially different way. Changes in Catholic understandings of pre-marital sexuality, like the ascendancy of this liberationist ideology more generally, did not simply amount to an emancipation from sexual repression, but signified a deeper shift in the way sex and religion were ontologically categorised. Sex became understood as a 'natural' process that revealed humanity's essential animalism; the imposition of abstract religious ideas on the early development of this instinct was increasingly viewed with suspicion. Religion on the other hand was confined to the realm of the transcendent, removed from the earthly matter of the body and its processes. These two developments cannot be understood in isolation from one another, as historians of religion and sexuality have tended to do. They were one and the same thing; it was the *relationship* between sex and religion that was irreversibly changed in the post-war years.

Conclusion

In concluding this study, I will move through the various layers of intervention that it has advanced, situating these interventions in the context of present-day discussions about sex, Catholicism and history. The thesis has demonstrated that there was indeed a rupture in the relationship between sex and Christianity in the post-war decades as Brown maintained. However, the nature and timing of this rupture did not amount to the story of sixties ‘cultural revolution’ which he described.¹ Rather than being simply about an emancipation from the confines of ‘traditional’ religious subjugation, the memories of Catholic women suggest a deeper, conceptual separation between the religious and the sexual opened up in decades after the War. It was a separation which was rooted in the social and intellectual developments of the preceding decades, notably the emotional and existential fallout from the Second World War and the ascendancy of psychoanalytical modes of understanding. It was also a separation that worked along fundamentally ontological lines, driven by everyday, embodied experiences rather than liberating discursive formulations. The way Brown and many other historians have defined Christian belief has coloured their narratives of religious decline. Indeed, this ‘discursive’ approach was itself a product of the very times and processes they were attempting to describe.² The relegation of the religious to the realm of numinous abstraction is perhaps one of the most underappreciated legacies of a ‘sixties’ ideology.

In a number of ways, the active categorisation of sexual and religious experiences provided something of a lifeline for many of the interviewees’ Catholic faith. It was a mechanism that developed in the later stages of their marriages to deal with the conflicts, tensions and frustrations they encountered in early marriage. Just as Catholic women pursued creative, physical tactics to negotiate spiritual and sexual impulses while practising NFP, their decisions to reject Catholic teachings on contraceptive morality allowed them to balance and maintain both their marriages and religious identities. The rationale behind this break was as much ontological as it was emancipatory. Matters of faith were increasingly believed to be numinous, theological abstractions, while sex was defined as an immanent, biological ‘fact of life’. It was through this compartmentalisation that ‘liberal’ Catholic women made sense of their peculiarly post-war Catholic identity. In some ways then, the rupture between sex and religion amounted to the very opposite of a ‘death’ of Christian Britain. It was the lived process and the discursive tool that ensured the continued survival, albeit in a different form, of Christian beliefs and identities in a hostile, late-modern setting.

¹ Brown, *The Death of Christian*, pp.1-15.

² *Ibid*, pp.9-17.

At the same time, the separation of the religious and the sexual had lasting consequences for Catholic devotion at both a personal and an institutional level. Catholic beliefs on sexual morality, which had been so central to Catholic culture in the immediate post-war years, were increasingly dismissed as irrelevant and antiquated by the end of the century. This unprecedented cleaving between personal Catholic religiosities and the processes of the body represented a significant contraction in the ethical territory occupied by Catholic beliefs. Certain historians have been eager to dismiss any conclusions that faintly hint at the 'secularisation thesis', but changes in post-war Catholicism did amount to, perhaps not the death, but certainly the deterioration of a certain kind of religious devotion. The paradox at the heart of post-war, 'liberal' Catholicism, according to Lodge and Hornsby-Smith, was that the rejection of absolute, doctrinal codes on sexual morality allowed many Catholics to uphold their faith, while at the same time opening up new questions and uncertainties about the basis of religious authority *per se*.³ Indeed, this can be seen to feed into a larger paradox that has been applied to the post-war condition, with existentialist philosophers and historians like Avner Offer arguing that expanded choices and liberties had the propensity to undermine rather than augment individual well-being.⁴ However, Catholic women grappled with a tension that went beyond this epistemological matter of opportunity, conscience and autonomy. The theological belief system through which they made sense of the world and their own position in it was increasingly seen to be at odds with the apparently immanent rules and processes of human sexuality. Their faith was severed from the symbolic and corporeal arena of the body. It was this problematic, above and beyond any other, which defined the late-modern Catholic experience.

The conceptual separation between sex and religion has held significant implications for public discussions about and within the Catholic Church throughout the second half of the twentieth century. The Catholic birth control debate of the 1960s existed in a climate in which this separation was at its zenith in academic discourses. It informed the Pope's eventual rejection of the 'liberal' case for change, but was equally present in the way this case was constructed by progressive members of The Papal Commission for Birth Control. Sexual experiences were evaluated in a way that neglected their potentially transcendent dimensions, while religious sensibilities were seen to bear little relation to the immanence of the body. These oversights coloured the notion of the 'personal' which ran throughout the Catholic birth control debate. An alternative means of gauging the personal has been advanced in this thesis, one in which spoken word and memory have been afforded a privileged position. The intention has been to shine a light on the intimate and emotional aspects of both sexual and spiritual sensibilities which have hitherto been overlooked by Catholic commentators. Retrospection, often derided for its

³ Lodge concluded his book by saying 'On the whole, the disappearance of Hell was a great relief, though it brought new problems', Lodge, *How Far*, p.113. Hornsby-Smith, *Roman Catholic Beliefs*.

⁴ Offer, *The Challenge of Affluence*, p.1.

adjudged inauthenticity, can illuminate the meanings that are attached to these highly personal aspects of experience, thereby offering an alternative window into the way Catholic moralities are constructed and lived out.

What emerged from this approach to the 'personal' was the centrality of life-cycle stage to the sexual development of Catholic women. The interviewees described a clear break in their marriages, as the relationship between their religious beliefs and sexual behaviour was irreversibly disrupted in later marriage. The 'liberal' Catholic identity that was adopted at this stage was understood to represent a new form of selfhood, or more precisely the realisation of a more authentic form of self that had previously been obscured. A sense of individual agency was therefore central to the way these changes in personal identity were remembered and experienced. The interviewees worked to present themselves as authors of their own stories, conscious of the pervasive perception of religious individuals as passive victims of psychological indoctrination. Reading their stories backwards allows us to nullify the indictments of the 'infantilism hypothesis' and recognise how Catholic women's lives were made up of transitory moments of experience.

The impact of the changing relationship between sex and Catholicism has not been limited to the subject of birth control, but continues to affect public discussions about Catholic understandings of human sexuality in general. When assessing the Church's approach to sex in post-war England, the recent revelations of child abuse represent a terrible and unavoidable presence.⁵ Cultural and journalistic representations of the scandals have often been predicated on the notion that Catholicism's approach to human sexuality is not just circumstantially abusive to individual victims, but also socially destructive by its very nature.⁶ This reading of the abuse has even gained some accreditation from leading Church representatives; the report Time For Action, written by a committee of leading clerics from across the Christian Churches, concluded that the Church as an institution, but also Christianity as a religion, has encouraged a 'culture of shame' which 'feeds abuse'.⁷ The scandals have therefore been placed in a continuum with Humanae Vitae, positioned as the archetypal expression of the Church's antiquated, unmodern and pathologically unhealthy understanding of sex.

What has proved particularly unsettling is the growing body of evidence which shows how the Church actively covered up and suppressed the allegations. It is apparent that the abuse, to some

⁵ The analysis presented here is concerned with marital sexuality and so does not attempt to provide an explanation of the crimes committed. The setting within which the incidents occurred, in terms of time and space, is though irrefutably linked to this a study's subject matter.

⁶ While the ESRC Urgency Grant funded project Historical Child Sex Abuse represents the first major attempt to document the recent spate of revelations in the UK, historians continue to overlook the Catholic example or treat it as an undifferentiated part of a broader problem. Using Stanley Cohen's concept of a 'moral panic' could provide a valuable starting point from which to assess the media's representation of Catholic abuse. S. Cohen, Moral Panics and Folk Devils, (Oxford, 2011).

⁷ H. Freeman, 'Church Culture of Shame 'Feeds Abuse'', The Guardian, Dec 4th 2002, p.9.

extent, was made possible by a culture of silence surrounding sexual matters that permeated the Church at all levels. Humanae Vitae has been viewed as a consequence of similar failures. It is commonly considered to be the product of the Church's closeted approach to sex, its refusal to engage with the cultural, technological and intellectual advances of modernity.⁸ The evidence sourced here suggests that this reading of the Encyclical's intellectual basis needs some revision. Humanae Vitae was not produced by a refusal to engage with the outside world or an ignorance of secular thinking. In some ways, the Commission's case for change was undermined by its zealous adherence to contemporary secular understandings of sex. The Church's approach to sexuality was made up of different strands which were rooted in varying and sometimes conflicting theological, doctrinal and institutional sources. Acknowledging these distinctions will allow for a more incisive and fruitful interrogation of the problems that are present within its pastoral structures.

Humanae Vitae was however, the consequence of a deep-seated conceptual divide between sexual and religious domains of knowledge. The central hierarchy, as well as both liberal and conservative members of the lay community, defined sexuality as the immanent, biological counterpoint to the divinity of Catholic theology. The operation of this divide in the child abuse scandals, in terms of the mentalities of those committing the crimes, those who orchestrated their cover up and those who reported on the phenomenon, is a subject which urgently demands historical attention. The perceived 'immanence' of sexuality has been central to secular commentators' diagnoses of celibate repression; priests' inability to relate to the material, bodily experience of sex has been viewed as the root cause of their perversion. Equally, the 'transcendence' of the religious has been a disconcerting presence in the rationale and practical operation of the clerical hierarchy's cover up of the scandals. As Marie Kennan has illustrated, the justification behind not submitting priests to legal authorities was often based on the idea that the clergy existed in a state above and beyond the earthly domain.⁹

Celibacy has been identified by many in the media as the cause of both the Church's position on contraceptive morality and the child sex abuse.¹⁰ Indeed, leading clerical representatives within the Vatican have publicly affirmed this explanation of the relative preponderance of paedophiles

⁸ For example, Robert Nowell's assertion that the Encyclical was 'no more than the private views of the Bishop of Rome' has received much concurrence from both Catholic and secular commentators. R. Nowell, 'Sex and Marriage' in P. Harris (ed), On Human Life, (1968, London).

⁹ M Keenan, Child Sexual Abuse and the Catholic Church: Gender, Power and Organizational Culture, (Oxford, 2012) pp.24-53, 154-229.

¹⁰ For example, this indictment was at the heart of Diarmuid McCulloch's three part BBC documentary 'Sex and the Church'. He concluded the series with this comment on the Catholic Church's problems with both child abuse and women 'The problem is an institutional one peculiar to the western Church and its catholic successor: compulsory celibacy for the clergy, which Protestants rejected 500 years ago. Celibacy puts the Catholic clergy on a spiritual pedestal. It's very easy to move from that to thinking you're exempt from the ordinary rules of everyday society.' 'Sex and the Church: Part 3 – Christianity V The West', BBC, first aired 24 April 2015.

within the clergy.¹¹ For a number of the interviewees though, celibacy was part and parcel of a larger problem with clergy and its position with regards to sex. As Marian eruditely articulated -

‘The main thing is because they rejected the earthly experience, they grew up in theory. You don’t live in theory, theoretically you don’t live in theory, and practically you don’t.’¹²

The line that Marian drew between the theory and earthly experience characterised a distinctly late-modern way of thinking about Catholicism’s relationship with sexuality. This *way of thinking* was not merely a discursive pattern limited to the realm of the cerebral, but a division that had momentous, sometimes destructive, consequences for the everyday lives of many Catholic individuals.

The break between sex and religion that has been described here was both specific to the Catholic experience, and also reflective of broader trends in English society. As was stated in the introduction, my intention has been to draw out commonalities in the conceptions of religion advanced by Brown, his ‘liberated’, secular subjects and those who continued to identify as Christian. There is now a need to take this further and explore how an ontological framework, demanded by the lens of Catholicism, related to the experiences of those who rejected their Christian identities. The Catholic experience was both peculiar to and also a composite part of mainstream, historical processes. The firm boundaries that Brown and McLeod draw around ‘internal’ and ‘external’ causes of Christian change, between ‘religious’ and ‘secular’ groupings are misleading.¹³ Equally, attempts to entirely downplay the specificity of Catholic life runs against the very particular experiences that were recalled by the interviewees. Recognising the ‘same but different’ nature of Catholicism in the post-war is a vital imperative for historians and theologians alike.

The extent to which Catholic communities in other British territories, notably Ireland and Scotland, underwent similar changes would make for a valuable avenue of further research. Moreover, extending the study beyond these boundaries to consider the Catholic experience in continental Europe and North America would mirror the larger geographical platforms with which advocates of a ‘sexual revolution’ thesis, such as Brown and Marwick, have engaged.¹⁴ Nevertheless, it must be reiterated that the changes outlined here can only claim to be to representative of an English Catholic experience. Furthermore, it was a particular Catholic

¹¹ C. Wahlquist, ‘Celibacy Rule May have contributed to child sex abuse, says Catholic Church,’ *The Guardian*, 11 Dec 2014, accessed at <http://www.theguardian.com/world/2014/dec/12/celibacy-rule-may-have-contributed-to-child-sex-abuse-says-catholic-church>.

¹² Marian, interviewed 26/09/2013.

¹³ Brown, *Religion and Society*, pp.240-253, McLeod, *The Religious Crisis*, p.8.

¹⁴ Brown, *Religion and the Demographic Revolution*, Marwick, *The Sixties*.

experience. The working class and immigrant Catholic communities, generally concentrated in industrial towns in the North of England, have been slightly underrepresented within the sample. Integrating a fuller analysis of these perspectives would be a welcome addition to the field, and one that could open up a discussion of how racial identities intersected with sexual practices and moralities.

It is, of course, possible to locate counter discourses that ran against the pattern sketched here, notably those produced by actors and agencies working beyond mainstream organised Christianity. The expansion of New Religious Movements in the 1960s has been well documented by the likes of Arthur Marwick and Gerald Parsons.¹⁵ Many of these groups propounded spiritualities which were closely tied to bodily, in many instances sexual, sensations. Equally, free love initiatives were to espouse the ecstatic, 'out-of-body' potential of sexual pleasure. Crucially though, both these movements were explicitly forged *against* the dominant culture.¹⁶ They served as conscious protests against not only mainstream Christian thought, but also the norms and mores of a wider climate. In this sense, subaltern attempts to emphasise the immanence of spirituality (notably different to religiosity as Linda Woodhead and Paul Heelas have discussed) and the transcendence of sexuality indicated the extent of the ascendancy of the ontological divide outlined here.¹⁷ It was a trend which was both personal and institutional in its scope, discursive and experiential in its nature, historical and historiographical in its implications.

Despite widespread efforts to resist the hegemonic authority of the secularisation paradigm, elements of it continue to shape the intellectual apparatus which historians construct around religious subjects. At a narrative level, the idea that modernity went hand-in-hand with a process of linear religious decline has been rightly dismantled in the last twenty years. The sociologist Peter Berger, a leading proponent of the secularisation theory during the 1960s, predicted the death of religion in Britain within the space of twenty years. By the 1980s, Berger was to speak candidly about how his prediction and approach to religion had been misguided – 'I think what I and most of the other sociologists wrote about secularisation in the 1960s was wrong'.¹⁸ Despite these accessions, religious change continues to be assessed within a win/lose framework which is premised on static, absolute ideas of liberation, authority and autonomy. These ideals map out a secularist portrait of power relations, one in which the 'transcendent' has no place. The symbols, values and meanings of everyday life are analysed in what Taylor would

¹⁵ Marwick, *The Sixties*, pp. 288–358, G. Parsons, *The Growth of Religious Diversity: Vol I*, (New York, 2012) pp.275-304.

¹⁶ The relationship between new religious movements and the counter culture in the 1960s is developing a growing historiography. For an introduction to this area, see McLeod, *The Religious Crisis*, pp. 141 -160.

¹⁷ P. Heelas and L. Woodhead, *The Spiritual Revolution: why religion is giving way to spirituality*, (Oxford, 2005).

¹⁸ 'Epistemological Modesty: An Interview with Peter Berger' *Christian Century*, 114, (1997) p.974.

call an 'immanent frame', denying integral aspects of religious sensibility.¹⁹ The memories of Catholic women encourage us to problematise these concepts and place them in an alternative, metaphysical framework. With this, a different story of not only religious but also sexual change emerges.

This is not to deny the operation of a traditional form of coercive power in the Catholic experience. We have seen how questions of autonomy and authority were very real dimension of the changes in Catholic women's sexual behaviour, contraceptive choices and religious identities. What I have attempted to do with this traditional story of power dynamics has hopefully been a little more subtle – digging beneath its apparently self-evident values to show how ontological ideas intersected with a narrative of liberation, while simultaneously suggesting that history, particularly the history of sexuality, should not always be treated as a thought experiment in 'how power works'. In the introduction we touched on the dialogue between Cook and Houlbrook over the parameters of their shared field.²⁰ This exchange is a distillation of a larger discussion about the purpose of history. Even when subverted by a Foucauldian twist, historical attentions continue to be preoccupied with unpicking the way individual experience has been governed and disciplined by external structures. The sexual and religious experiences of Catholic women in the post-war have hitherto been understood in this context, an exemplar of shifting modes of authority between the institution and the individual, the internal and the external, science and religion. The interviewees' memories prompt us to engage with an alternative, 'vertical' dimension, looking beyond but also resituating the question of power in a deeper, ontological framework.²¹ Their testimony ultimately encourages us to broaden the horizons of historical practice.

¹⁹ Taylor, *A Secular Age*, p. 548.

²⁰ On p.13 of the thesis. M. Houlbrook, 'Sexing the History of Sexuality', *History Workshop Journal*, 60, (2005) p. 217, H. Cook, 'Emotions, Bodies, Sexuality and Sex Education in Edwardian England', *The Historical Journal*, 55, (2012) p.475.

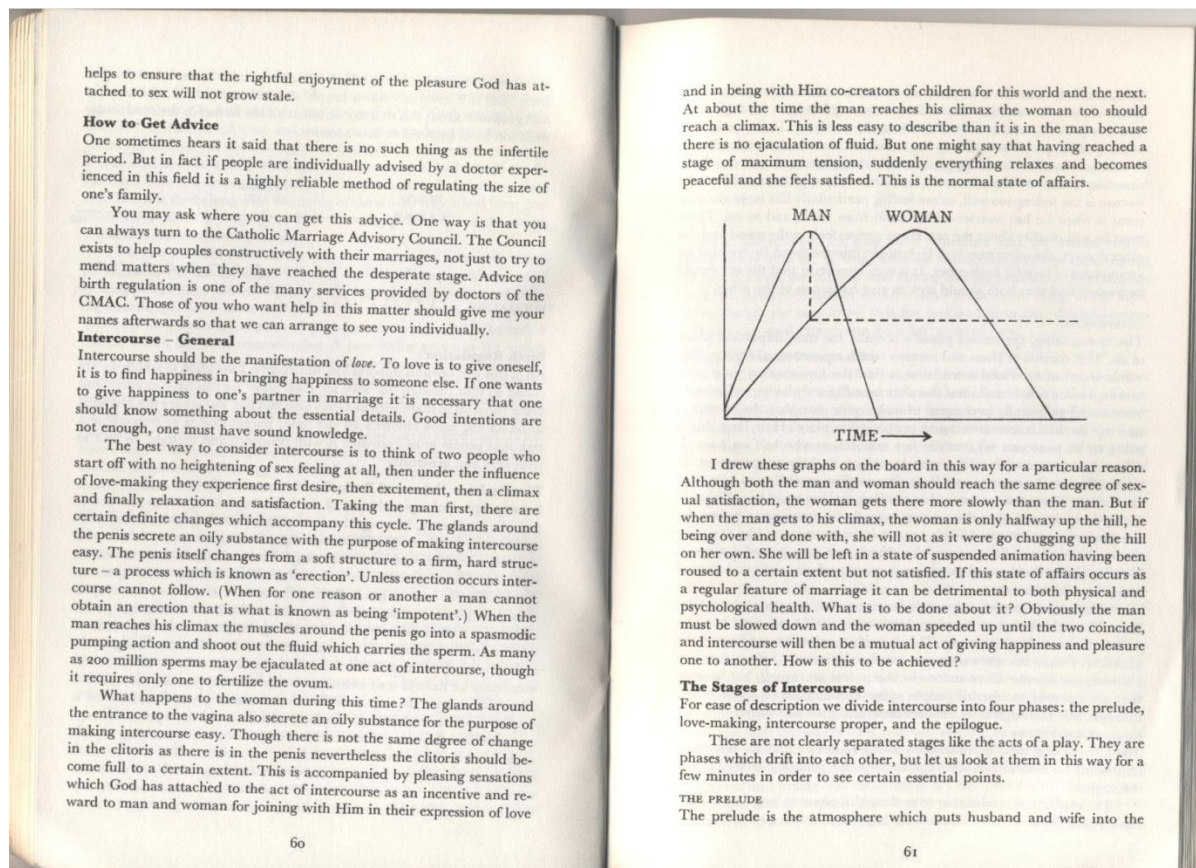
²¹ Taylor, *A Secular Age*, p.708.

Appendices

Appendix A: Project description used in advertisements.

An oral history project is underway at the University of Sussex that explores the sexual and religious experiences of Catholic women in post-war England. Funded by the Arts and Humanities Research Council, the research provides Catholic individuals with an opportunity to speak about their memories of the period for the first time in historical analysis. It examines the way married Catholic women negotiated spiritual and sexual demands on a day-to-day basis – including topics such as contraceptive decisions, religious practice and family life. The project is currently looking for participants – complete anonymity is guaranteed for all interviewees and a questionnaire is submitted in advance. If you would like more information about the project, please email David Geiringer at dg202@sussex.ac.uk

Appendix B: Extract and graph illustration from Preparing Engaged Couples for Marriage, CMAC training manual, (London, 1969).



Appendix C Graph detailing the different readings possible from rectal and oral use of a thermometer when practising NFP. In J. Marshall, The Infertile Period: Principles and Practices, (Baltimore, 1963).

How to Interpret Your Charts

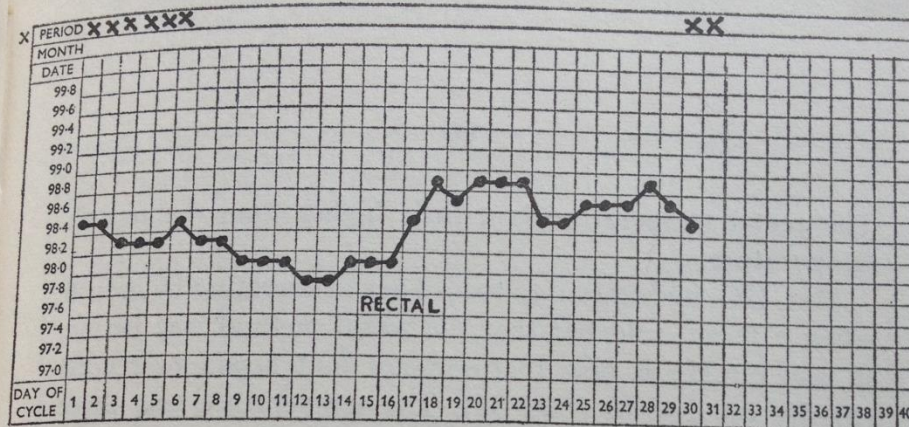


Fig. 34a

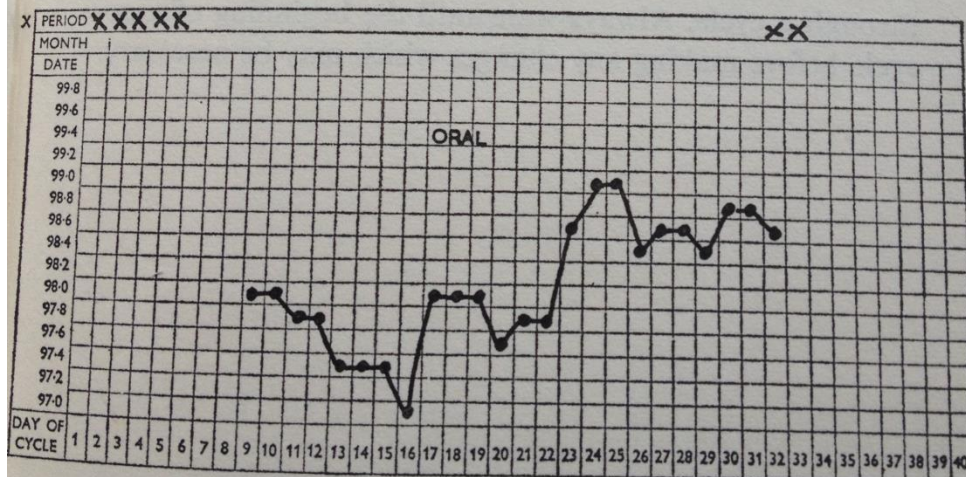
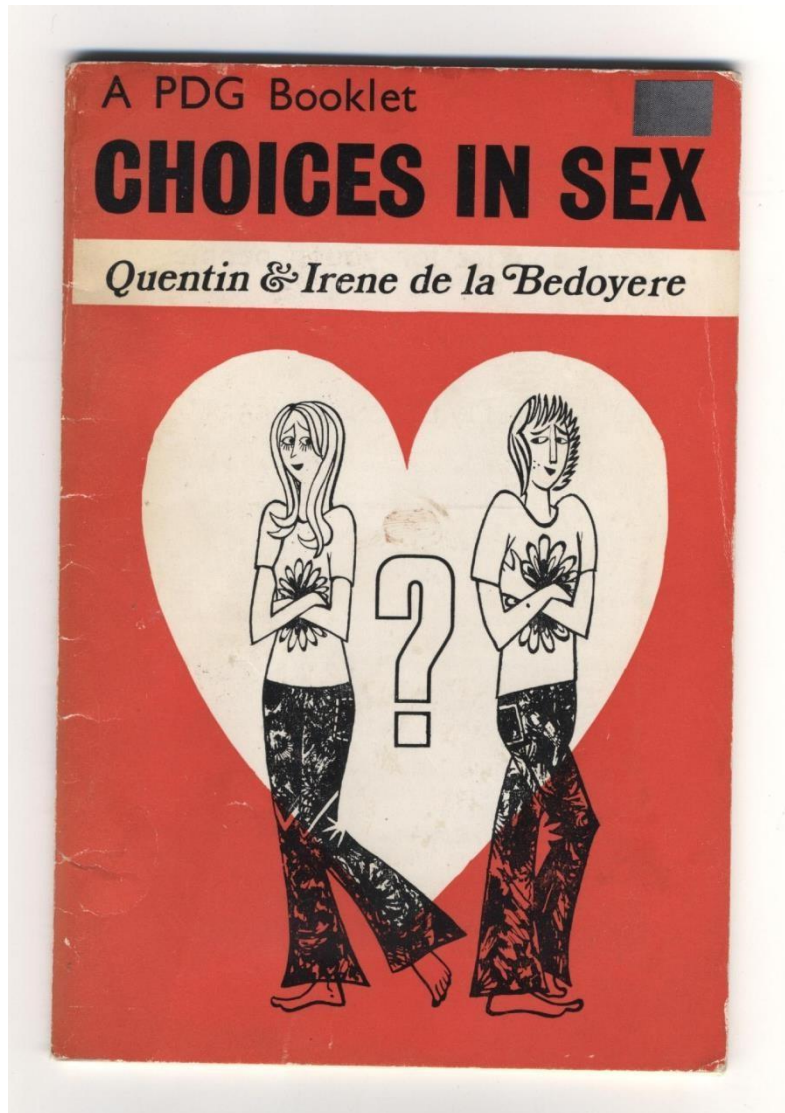


Fig. 34b

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Appendix D Front cover of a sexual advice manual aimed at young Catholics. De la Bedoyere, Q., and de la Bedoyere, I., Choices in Sex, (Dartford, 1964).



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Appendix E Biography of interviewees.

1. Penny – Born 1927, 4 children
2. Veronica – Born 1927, 6 children (email correspondence)
3. Anne – Born 1928, 8 children,
4. Elizabeth – Born 1929, 4 children
5. Doreen – Born 1930, 2 children
6. Rosie – Born 1930, 5 children
7. Margaret – Born 1931, 3 children
8. Angela – Born 1931, 4 children
9. Marian – Born 1932, 4 children
10. Mary – Born 1934, 3 children
11. Lucy – Born 1934, 4 children
12. June – Born 1934, 4 children
13. Katherine – Born 1934, 8 children (2 adopted)
14. Frank – Born 1935, 5 children
15. Gregory – Born 1935, 4 children
16. Lynn - Born 1936, 4 children
17. Bridget – Born 1938, 4 children
18. Lydia – Born 1939, 3 children
19. Georgina - Born 1940, 6 children
20. Leonie – Born 1945, 2 children
21. Sorchia – Born 1946, 1 child
22. Teresa – Born 1947, 2 children
23. Joan – Born 1949, 5 children
24. Patricia – Born 1951, 3 children
25. Wendy – Born 1954, 3 children
26. Michaela – Born 1956, 2 children

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Box 2 - The birth control debate and the 1960s.

Box 3 - The birth control debate and the 1960s.

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9. Marian – Born 1932.
10. Mary – Born 1934.
11. Lucy – Born 1934.
12. June – Born 1934.
13. Katherine – Born 1934.
14. Frank – Born 1935.
15. Gregory – Born 1935.
16. Lynn - Born 1936.
17. Bridget – Born 1938.
18. Lydia – Born 1939.
19. Georgina - Born 1940.
20. Leonie – Born 1945.
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