

Christianity and Power/Knowledge: Understanding Foucault's Theorisation of Religious Practices

Brajesh Kumar¹

Abstract: Michel Foucault has theorized Christianity as a discourse that combines truth and power with the development of the subjective knowledge of the self. It claims that Christianity was a historical mechanism of the production of truth about self and the modification of self through practices like confession, penitential rites, and monastic obedience. This ritual process, in turn, serves to consolidate institutional authority. Using Foucault's archaeological and genealogical methods, the paper delves into the emergence of the categories of truth, like sin/purity and temptation/obedience. These truth categories then guide individuals' behaviour and force them to surrender before the Christian discourses. Foucault's theorisation has been criticised for being Eurocentric and reductionist. However, he described how religious practice is immersed in regimes of power/knowledge. This paper argues that Christianity should not be read as simply a belief system but as a discursive formation.

Key words: Christianity, Confession, Michel Foucault, Power/Knowledge, and Subjectivity.

1. Introduction

Michel Foucault is one of the most prominent thinkers of the twentieth century. His studies of madness, prisons, medicine, and sexuality show how modern institutions discipline individuals as objects (Foucault, 1977). As far as religion is concerned, Foucault never outlined a systematic theory of religion. However, he frequently provided critical observations on Christianity. He described the practices of confession, penitential rites, and monastic obedience (Foucault 1997) in Christianity. These ideas have significantly influenced the study of religion. Many scholars utilised his genealogical and archaeological methods in their analysis of religious practices (Carrette 2000; Arary & Anderson 2005).

Christianity is located centrally in Foucauldian thought. Christianity established a double duty - the duty to believe in the truth of the religious doctrine and the duty to know oneself and one's inner faults (Foucault 1997). The second of these obligations is made clear in the sacrament of confession and in monastic life. It forced the believer to speak their temptations, their desires and their sins to others. In this way, the Christian

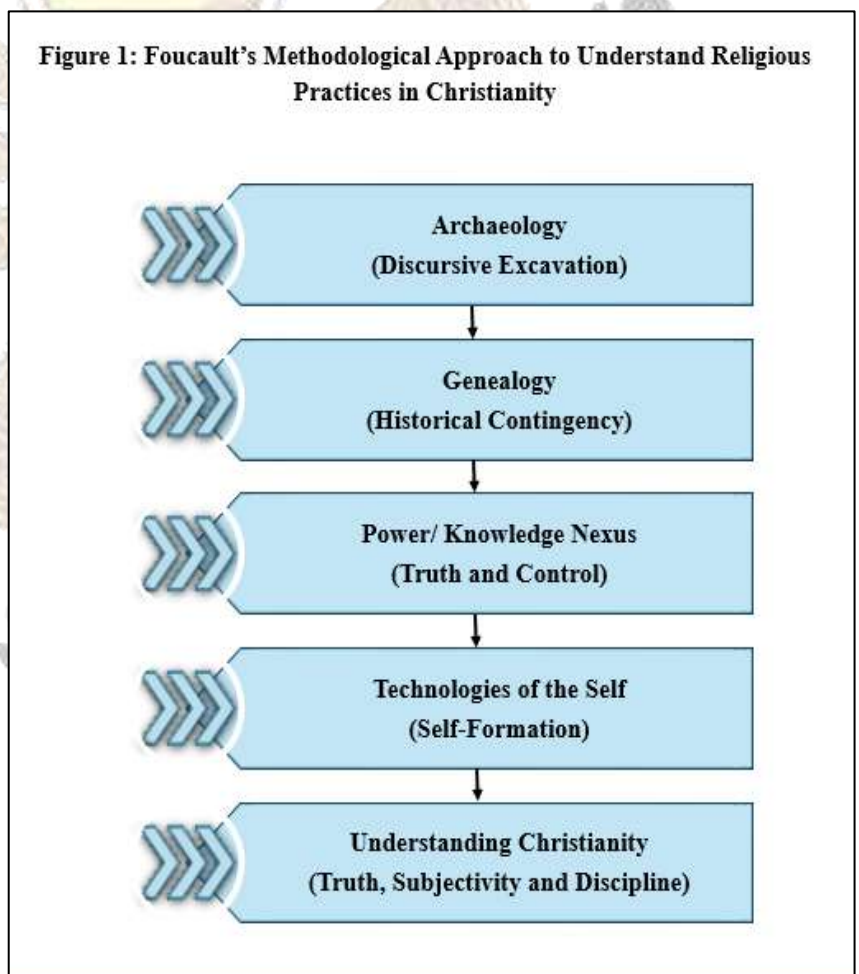
¹ Associate Professor, Department of Sociology, Babasaheb Bhimrao Ambedkar University, Raebareli Road, Lucknow-226021 (Uttar Pradesh)

tradition, established a ‘hermeneutics of the self’, linking spiritual truth to specific techniques of power that shape personal behaviour. Public confession turned into a technology of the self, incorporating the tensions between individual spirituality and institutional authority (Foucault 1988).

This paper throws light on how, through confession and obedience, Christianity creates self-knowledge and institutional control simultaneously. Foucault identifies power/knowledge as a way to practise the function of discourse in the religious arena to create truth categories (sin/purity, temptation/obedience, and so on) which define the believer as a subject. This way, the Christian practices become historically accountable practices of governance, rather than a neutral spiritual activity, which forms a thin boundary between the inner and outer worlds. The present paper supports Foucault in his point of view as a critique that is relevant. It theorizes his insights, which challenge the continuities of religion as a truth discourse and a mode of discipline.

2. Foucault’s Methodology

For a fruitful engagement with Foucault’s approach to religion in general and Christianity in specific, it is important to understand his methodological approach. Foucault largely applied his analytical twin-approach, archaeology and genealogy. This allowed him to go beyond the limits of theological or doctrinal analysis, and place religion in relation to the historical practices. By throwing light in historical practices, religion is seen in terms of discourse, power, and subject formation. This is what Foucault argued formulated modern subjectivity in the West. Foucault’s methodology has been summarised in Figure 1.



Source: Constructed by the author



Foucault used archaeology in his early works, like *Madness and Civilization* (1965) and *The Birth of the Clinic* (1973). Archaeology was not about uncovering physical artifacts but the layers of discourses. Discourses are accumulated over time, determining how social phenomena as madness, illness, or sin were thought about. Through his concept of archaeology, knowledge, the notion of ‘a game of truth’, Foucault expressed the status and nature of discourses that shape the behaviour and thinking of an individual in society.

Applied to Christianity, this approach explores that Christianity should not be read first and foremost as a belief system or a range of theological propositions as contained in the sacred book. It should be understood as a discourse that produces truths about human beings. Penitential rites are the religious way of accepting one’s mistake and expressing one’s regret to repair and strengthen one’s relationship with God and the community. Penitential rites are analysed as social discourse in relation to what constitutes purity, sin, or spiritual truth. This is one of several regimes of discourse in Christian practices for creating the conditions for individuals to develop their self-knowledge.

In the later part of 1970s, Foucault used a more explicitly genealogical style of doing history. He used genealogy in *Discipline and Punish* (1977) and *The History of Sexuality* (1990). Genealogy did not depict a linearly progressive history of ideas from unawareness to truth. Rather, it stressed that truth is shaped by power inherent in social institutions and hence is biased in favour of the dominant. Genealogy is helpful in understanding what we know today as true is in fact an outcome of historical power-ridden process and hence is not natural and true.

This approach, for instance, incorporated Foucault's genealogical explanation of specific Christian rituals, such as monastic obedience and confession. He described the emergence of them in specific historical situations and how they influence subjectivity. For example, early Christians used self-punishment for their crimes as a means of self-examination and surveillance rather than only as a religious rite. According to Foucault (1997), it ties the individual to religious authority and customs. Because of this, Foucault contended that genealogy presents Christianity as a dynamic field in which the discourses of truth are linked with control and disciplinary mechanisms.

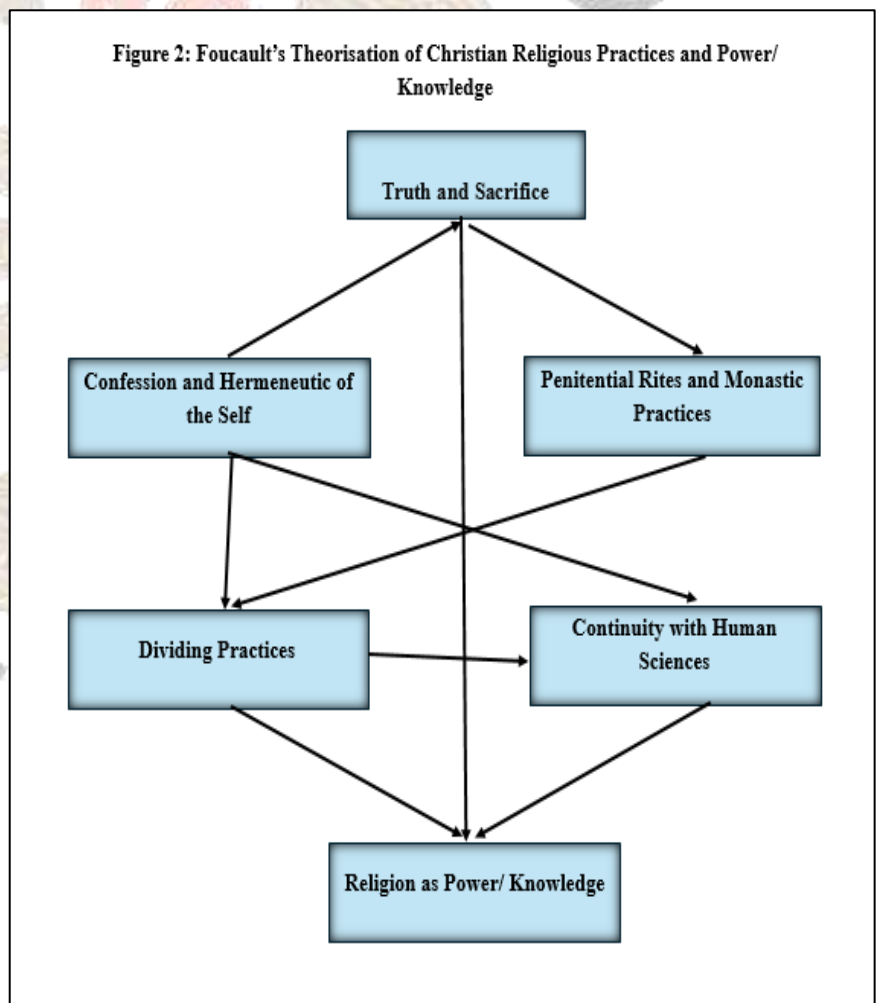
One of the key insights of these methods is the interlinked relationship between knowledge and power. Knowledge is never neutral but always shaped by the mechanics of power. For instance, understanding of knowledge about the soul, sin, and purity was formed in the context of Christian practices that served the dual purpose of creating the knowledge that the church would then use to exercise its power. Rather than

merely conveying spiritual truths and confession, it leads to establishing institutionalized means and a regime of power (Foucault, 1999b).

Foucault (1988) developed the notion of ‘technologies of the self’ to explain practices through which people are affected by their own actions of which characterizes their knowledge and subjectivities. Some technologies in Christianity included confession, the examination of conscience, and obedience to spiritual agents. These practices brought believers into the inner life, which aligns with the expectations of the church and the social institutions. It thus creates a self that was simultaneously religiously oriented and socially framed. Foucault moved the study of Christianity away from theological or doctrinal debates. He examined individual behaviour in terms of historical regimes of power and modes of self-formation through archaeology, genealogy, and technologies of the self.

3. Foucault’s Theorisation of Christian Religion

Foucault's theorisation of Christian religion emerges from his lectures and writings on confession, monastic practices, and the technologies of the self. He was not a systematic theorist of religion. However, his genealogy and archaeology reveal Christianity to be the key institution in the generation of a different kind of subjectivity in the West. Christianity, he thought, offered practices that habitually combined truth, power, and the self. Thus, the religion works less as a doctrine than as a historical practice, which produces individual knowledge, categories of truth, and discipline. His theorisation has been summarised in Figure 2.



Source: Constructed by the author



3.1. Confession and the Hermeneutics of the Self

Foucault's analysis of confession is perhaps the most important contribution to the study of Christianity. He described that the Christian duty is not just to confess sin to oneself but also to others in his lecture 'Christianity and Confession' (Foucault, 1997). It is a move away from Greco-Roman methods of self-examination, which aimed for harmony between determination and reason. It reflects a Christian hermeneutic of the self, which requires the revealing of internal thoughts, feelings, and sins for liberation.

Confession establishes an association between the subjectivity of the individual and the institutional authority. As a result, surveillance mechanisms are established. In addition to confessing their sins, people also submit to the institutional authority during this procedure. When someone confides in a priest or other religious figure about their worst temptations, they are submitting to institutional authority rather than merely stating the facts. Confession is, in this sense, a visible expression of the union of power and knowledge. Christian religious rites influence people's subjective knowledge while also bolstering religious authority and power. (Foucault, 1999).

3.2. Truth and Sacrifice

According to Foucault's analysis of the truth dilemma, Christianity also brought about a new kind of connection between sacrifice and truth. Renunciation of the self is something that cannot be grasped without truth about oneself. He described that individuals sacrifice the self in order to learn the truth of being, and they discover the truth of being in order to sacrifice the self (Foucault, 1997). The relation is circular, illustrating how Christianity integrated self-knowledge with self-denial. It was not an emancipatory venture, but one that reinforces the institutional power and authority of the Church.

This connection between belief in truth and the practice of sacrifice is what sets Christianity apart from other faiths. In Buddhism, for instance, awakening is based on knowledge of self, which is parallel to knowledge of religious doctrine. In other words, in Buddhism, knowing oneself, one's desires, and sufferings are the same as that of religious doctrine as taught by lord Buddha. However, in Christianity, which places the trust of salvation in doctrinal belief and confession, leads to surrendering before the authority of the Church. This surrendering before the Church leads to salvation.

3.3. Penitential Rites and Monasticism

Similarly, Foucault analysed the penitential rituals and monastic life as sites of Christian subjectivity. Confession and self-punishment for one's old sins were not merely a sacramental gesture. It was a



condition, an identification that set the individuals apart as those who had to publicly display the truth of sin (Foucault, 1997). Purity could only be restored through such a contradictory exhibition of being defiled, which is then overcome to get salvation through religious rituals. So original selfhood is subjected to ritual degradation. Ritual degradation is a public act that leads to humiliation and shame. Ritual degradation does not replace the original self with the better self. In the process, it produces a new kind of subject that is more disciplined and manageable. This means that the new self is more obedient and normal as per the requirements of the social institutions. The main objective is to produce submission of individuals to the domination of the institutions. It creates a faithful individual for the social institutions.

These practices were further institutionalized with monasticism, which emphasized obedience, contemplation, and confession. Unlike enduring obedience, which describes the mastery of the self, Christian obedience meant submission to the religious master, who would then guide individuals toward contemplation of God. Confession, for Foucault, is a technology of power; a means by which the truth of the self was linked to submission to domination (Foucault, 1988). So, knowledge and liberation of the self are inseparable from the authority of the Church.

3.4. Dividing Practices

Christianity similarly promotes dividing practices in the same way as Foucault's studies on Madness, Medicine, and Criminality. Thus, the categories of sin and purity, saved and damned, virtuous and tempted, provided not just the organizing principles of religious life but served to shape the very nature of subjective knowledge itself. These practices of dividing are not neutral boundaries but discursive formations of governance and control. Psychiatry sets apart the mad from the sane; similarly, prison sets apart criminals from law-abiding people. In the same way, Christianity separated faithful people by identifying them through confession and self-punishment (Foucault, 1977).

3.5. Continuity with the Human Sciences

Foucault made a bold claim that the confessing methods of Christianity resurfaced in modern non-religious fields. Starting from the eighteenth century onward, new sciences developed like psychiatry, psychoanalysis, pedagogy, and so on. However, the practice of confession did not disappear. It reappeared in the new non-religious or secular settings. These new sciences accepted the verbalization and acceptance technique, which helped people create new selves rather than require them to renounce their old identities (Foucault 1988). According to this perspective, the technologies of confession developed by Christianity have opened the door for the creation of subjective sciences in contemporary Western civilization. This



connection between scientific and theological discourses is a holdover from long-cherished Christian customs. It endures into contemporary power and knowledge structures.

4. Discussion

In the disciplines of sociology, cultural history, and religious studies, Foucault's views on Christianity are extremely pertinent. However, these echoes also call for in-depth criticism. There are advantages and disadvantages to Foucault's primary approach of Christianity as a type of discourse of power and knowledge.

One of the strongest aspects is the fact that Foucault reveals the manner in which religion is perceived to be coupled with power. Discussing the subject of confession, penitential rites, and monastic obedience, he demonstrates how Christianity does not simply convey religious teachings but generates some truths regarding the self that connect people to the authority of the institution (Foucault, 1999). This focus on practice is a sign of a massive shift in methodology. Foucault does not argue theological arguments, but he examines the operation of truth-telling practices as technologies of the self that create individual subjectivity and social organisation.

Furthermore, Foucault shows how Christianity is not just a religious concept but also plays a significant role in the development of the modern human sciences. Psychiatry, psychoanalysis, and pedagogy later embraced techniques that were suggested by the processes of confession, disclosure, and self-examination (Foucault 1988). According to this viewpoint, Christianity is essential in bridging the gaps between traditional religious rituals and modern secular forms of subjectivity.

Additionally, the Foucault approach is criticized from a number of aspects. It is frequently argued that his genealogical approach leans toward either determinism or relativism. Critics question that he did not leave space for human agency or for the truth that lies beyond power. Others say that his method threatens to reduce people to mere puppets of power structures, without agency to resist (Racevskis, 1999).

Another criticism is that Foucault never articulated a coherent theory of religion. His scholarship focused almost exclusively on Western Christianity and did not include comparative studies of additional religious traditions. This situation leads us to consider whether his observations can be deemed exclusive to Christianity or applicable to religion in general (Carrette, 2000). Other scholars belonging to the critical deconstructive tradition critique Foucault for reductionism. So, to set religion mainly in terms of power and control is to ignore the aspects of any type of real, lived, local faith.



Postcolonial scholars have also used it to point out Eurocentrism within his work. Talal Asad has noticed, the fact that his work centres on Western Christianity leads him to sideline the broad spectrum of religious practices (Arary & Anderson, 2005). Foucault's methods have inspired studies beyond Europe. However, his own writings remain firmly grounded in a Western historical context.

5. Conclusion

Michel Foucault's genealogy was significant in the interpretation of Christianity and Western subjectivity. Christianity is much more than a legacy of belief; it is a history of narratives that have been modified but still bear the remnants of earlier versions. It is a historical account of a system in which truth, power, and self-knowledge are bound together. The Christian methods of confession, monastic obedience, and penitential rites are examples of what Foucault termed as technologies of the self. These processes were not only able to model Christians in a spiritual setting but also in other institutional settings. The religious and spiritual obligations were also disciplinary measures.

Christianity is presented not only as a practical or theological system, but also as a discourse of power/knowledge that produces ideals of sin, purity, desires, etc. This method formalized subjectivity, which was based on faithfulness to institutional power. They established places of meaning as well as places of action. This is further related to modern psychiatry, pedagogy, and law, where practices of examination, confession, and surveillance have governed people.

Using Foucault's approach to understand Christianity in this case means seeing religion differently. This is not a transcendental belief or doctrinal content but also an embodiment of those practices in which truth and power join hands. This method emphasises the way that religion contributes to the formation of current governance and regimes of subjectivity. Foucault's theorisation helps us to understand the ideas that Christianity is an important arena where the historical production of power, structures of knowledge, and the self are constantly produced.

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