CHAPTER 1

THE GREGORIAN REFORM, PASTORAL POWER, AND SUBJECTION

In Nietzsche’s parable of subjection, the subject is produced through the application of an outside force, “priestly” or pastoral power, which aims to provoke accountability and the internalization of bad conscience. External force produces the accountable, interiorized subject. In the present argument, it is assumed that even in the absence of any activity of folding or subjectivation, the subject is produced within a decentered nexus of power, knowledge, and language. Pastoral power represents one potential form of power that provokes the “internalization” of bad conscience and the attendant fiction of the subject. This Nietzschean parable of subjection is applicable to the phenomenon of individuation in the twelfth century, with the problem that it lacks all historical contextualization and all specificity as to the traits of pastoral power, including its use of confession as a technique.

Fortunately, Michel Foucault developed the concept of pastoral power in the 1970s. Its significance within Foucault’s analytics of power is made clear in the 1982 essay “The Subject and Power.” Pastoral power is crucial to support Foucault’s contention that modern governmentality, contrary to a commonly held assumption, is characterized not only by the application of power to the masses, to the population as a whole, at the expense of the individual, but also by individualizing forms of power that find their historical source in pastoral power, invented first by early religions, including the Egyptians, Hebrews, and finally the Christians, who perfected it:

[M]ost of the time, the state is envisioned as a kind of political power that ignores individuals, looking only at the interests of the totality or, I should say, of a class or a group among the citizens. That’s quite true. But I’d like to underline the fact that the state’s power (and that’s one of the reasons for its strength) is both an individualizing and a totalizing form of power.¹
Foucault summarizes four principal traits of pastoral power:

1. It is a form of power whose ultimate aim is to insure individual salvation in the next world.
2. Pastoral power is not merely a form of power that commands; it must also be prepared to sacrifice itself for the life and salvation of the flock...
3. It is a form of power that looks after not just the whole community, but each individual in particular, during his entire life.
4. Finally, this form of power cannot be exercised without knowing the inside of people’s minds, without exploring their souls, without making them reveal their innermost secrets. It implies a knowledge of the conscience and an ability to direct it.  

The primary concern of this chapter is not with the fate of pastoral power as deployed within modern states, but with elucidating the history of the transformation of pastoral power in order to demonstrate the fundamental mutation it underwent during the twelfth century within the context of the movement known as the Gregorian Reform. During this era, pastoral power broadened its reach and enhanced its ability to elicit bad conscience among more people. Since the earliest era of the church, there had always been multiple procedures for dealing with sinners, from the rigorist position that sinners should be permanently excluded from the flock with no access to any kind of repayment or penance, to the exile of the sinner from the community for a set period of time, to the imposition of arduous or shameful acts that symbolized repayment to the community (such as fasting or wearing a hair shirt and covering oneself with ashes). During the twelfth century, the Gregorian Church, as part of its consolidation of canon law, cut through this morass of practices and officially defined “true penance” as confession to a priest. At the same time, the church constituted itself as a sovereign institution with its center of power in Rome, and built a bureaucracy that enabled it to rationalize penitential procedures throughout Latin Christendom. While Foucault insists upon the importance of confession as a technique of pastoral power, most famously in the *History of Sexuality, Volume 1*, and elsewhere traces a rough history of forms of penance, he does not designate the emergence of confession more precisely in time, nor link it to the emergent ecclesiastical formations, such as the Gregorian Reform, that would have new motives for inventing more efficacious forms of individualizing power. Foucault leaves sketchy or undefined the historical dynamics leading to the emergence of confession as the definitive form of pastoral power. This chapter aims to sketch the diagram in which this new confessional technique, which Foucault considers a kind of pastoral power, emerged.