



Science, Sin, and Sexuality in Roman-Catholic Discourses in the German-Speaking Area, 1870s to 1930s

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Abstract

Even though there is a substantive body of research on the emergence of sexual science and the overall scientification of sexuality that in Europe took place around 1900, we lack studies that focus on Roman-Catholic responses. This article addresses this gap by analyzing the Roman-Catholic discourse on sexuality between the 1870s and 1930s in the German-speaking area. Investigating papal encyclicals, pastoral letters, prayer, devotion, and instruction booklets, this paper argues that Roman-Catholic authors adopted scientific rhetoric and argumentation patterns in order to justify the Catholic sexual morality anew under the conditions of a society that became increasingly secularized. This adoption changed the Catholic evaluation of sexuality itself as well: Originally seen as a phenomenon of personal moral conduct, sexuality's societal and political importance in terms of a nation's health was increasingly acknowledged since the outbreak of World War I. Scientific concepts of health and disease increasingly replaced the formerly all-pervading theological notion of sinfulness. Furthermore, the Catholic sexual discourse was markedly gendered. By primarily discussing female sexuality, Catholic authors hoped to support the traditional Catholic family ideal that had come under pressure due to the increased secularization of society.

Keywords History of sexuality · Catholic church · German-speaking area · Nineteenth century · Twentieth century · Scientification

Introduction

In recent years, historians have begun to put their attention to the entangled histories of sexuality and religion. They started a kind of “dialogue between the secular and the spiritual” (Cocks 2006, p. 158) that had already been demanded by Harry G. Cocks in 2006 as necessary to better understand the complexities of modern

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sexualities that for the longest part have been explained with a predominant focus on secular discourses. By taking a closer look at religion, recent studies were able to show that the explanatory metanarrative of secularization and modernization failed to correctly account for religion's continuing significance in the formation of modern sexualities. It has therefore been noted by various scholars that more work in this field is needed to rectify the bigger picture (Eder 2009, p. 26f.; Herzog 2009, p. 1303).

However, research in this field is still in its infancy, and there exist noticeable differences in the current state of research between different religious denominations. Focusing on Christian denominations, the most work so far has been done for German Protestantism and Anglicanism. In the case of German Protestantism, some detailed studies that mostly focus on morality, welfare, and women's movements and their role in sexual politics have been published (Dickinson 2003, 2005; Lees 2000; Lisberg-Haag 2002). For the Anglican Church, research has already produced a quite nuanced body of literature. Thriving topics so far have been homosexuality debates within the churches (Lloyd 2014; Meek 2015; Willet 2009) or religious morality associations (Morgan 2007; Ramsey 2016). Work has also been done on various Anglican sexual discourses from the Victorian era to the middle of the twentieth century (Jones 2012; Maynard 1993; Morgan 2013).

In comparison, there are only a few studies on Catholic histories of sexuality. Already in 2007, Matti Bunzl stated that "when we think about the historiography of modern sexuality in regard to Catholicism, we confront a simple lacuna: it hardly exists" (Bunzl 2007, p. 53). His verdict still holds true. There are a couple of quite extensive yet mostly dated accounts that tried to capture the whole two-millennia long sexual history of Catholicism, mainly written by theologians or church critics (mostly outdated are Denzler 1997; Deschner 1989; Ranke-Heinemann 2012; the most recent book in this regard is Angenendt 2015). With a decidedly more scholarly focus, historians have produced accounts with foci from antiquity to the early modern period (Brown 1990; Brundage 1996; Wiesner-Hanks 2000). For the modern period, there are not many scholarly studies available. Jackson's (2011) research overview for the time from 1820 to 1920 reflects this lack of studies on Catholicism. The research overview from Danna (2011) for the time from 1920 to the present holds a little more information on the Catholic world (see especially pp. 120–22). The most recent example in this regard is a study by Bastidas and Beltrán (2019) that focuses on Roman-Catholic responses to the secularization of sexual life in Colombia from the 1960s to the 1980s. When it comes to the German-speaking area, it has to be noted that most studies (insofar as they have addressed religion at all) wrote a Protestant story (a discussion of this bias, albeit for the US-American situation, can be found in Griffith (2012)). One of the few notable exceptions is a study that addresses the West German church in post-1950s reproduction debates (Tichenor 2016). In this paper, I focus on Roman-Catholic sexual discourses in the German-speaking area from the 1870s to the 1930s to study how Catholic writers reacted to the increasing scientification and secularization of sexuality.

Catholicism during the nineteenth century was heavily engaged in finding its place in a modernizing world. For the Roman-Catholic church, historical developments and events such as the emergence of the modern nation state, the revolutions

of 1830 and 1848, ideologies such as liberalism, atheism, socialism, and capitalism, and the ongoing secularization of society were perceived as threats to an old established order in which the church was used to having its say in pretty much every aspect of life. Initially, the church's representatives reacted to the challenge of their authority with a fierce antimodernism that lasted well into the first decades of the twentieth century. Official encyclicals like the 1864 *Quanta Cura* (that was issued together with a list of "errors of modernity" called *Syllabus Errorum*) that denounced modernity's ideologies, inner-church announcements like the dogma of papal infallibility announced during the First Vatican Council in 1870 or the 1910 *Oath against modernism* that compelled clergy, priests, and teachers to take an oath against "modern heresies" can be seen as conservative reactions from a deeply unsettled church (for more details see Schatz 1998; Vögler 2007, pp. 84–100; Wolf 1998). The opposition towards modernity as such culminated in real political struggle as well, for example, in Prussia, during the so-called culture wars (Clark 2003). All these developments led to the formation of a new Catholic milieu in the German-speaking area called ultramontanism. The ultramontane movement that was accompanied by the establishment of a Catholic press and the founding of political parties challenges the longstanding perception of a continuous retreat of religion that gave way to an ever-increasing secularization as the classic scholarship on secularization has proclaimed (Ziemann 2009, pp. 32–56). However, the church's interaction with modernism began to change around the turn of the century. With the beginning of the twentieth century, Catholic authors began to participate in discourses of the time in a way that went beyond a simple refusal of modernity, as can be seen in the texts analyzed here.

This analysis focuses on a period of time when sexual discourses saw considerable changes due to the politicization and medicalization of sexuality (Eder 2009, pp. 187–209). The 1870s as a starting point are furthermore characterized by the introduction of secular marriage laws, whereas the 1930s saw the stepwise introduction of fascist governments with their own sexual politics that tried to push back religious influences.

The study addresses the following questions: How did the Roman-Catholic sexual discourse change over time? How did it interact with the increasing scientification of sexual discourses? Which significance did gender have in the discourse?

The paper is structured in the following way: At first, I discuss the study's methodology and the sources analyzed. I then discuss traditional topics of Roman-Catholic sexual discourse such as virginity and marriage. Afterwards, I describe conceptions of male sexuality. I then discuss publications dealing with the medicalization and politicization of sexuality before the paper closes with some concluding remarks.

Method and Sources

This study is based on critical discourse analysis as described by Jäger (2015) and investigates papal encyclicals, pastoral letters, theological treatises as well as prayer, devotion and instruction books, and brochures. Critical discourse analysis

understands discourses as socially constituted as well as socially constitutive. Since discourses establish a system of accepted knowledge, normative claims about truth and morality, and so on, they can be used to maintain existing power relations. At the same time, discourses act as medium to negotiate social changes. Discourses can thus become a marker of social change that becomes evident through discursive change. Critical discourse analysis intends to study this interplay between language use, power, ideology, and social change (for a brief theoretical introduction, see Wodak and Meyer, 2016). The authors of the books analyzed cover the whole range of the church hierarchy from ordinary priests to bishops and university theologians. Almost all sources analyzed hold the church's printing license, the so-called *imprimatur*, that was mandatory for doctrinal and ethical writings (Ritter and Bour 1996). Books without *imprimatur* nonetheless were written by theologians and reflect church teachings.

To find a representative sample, digital library catalogs of the German-speaking area were searched for keywords like “virginity,” “marriage,” “(sexual) morality,” etc. in combination with “catholic (church).”¹ Afterward, the findings were complemented by using literature references in the books found. This intertextual method led to a list of 130 publications that met the criteria. In a first step, the publications were analyzed on a macro level to gain insight into the prominent topics and subtopics, typical textual features, and so on (Jäger 2015, pp. 95–98). Due to the *imprimatur*, the majority of publications are quite consistent in style and content. In a second step, 35 representative publications were selected for a more detailed linguistic and propositional analysis (Jäger 2015, pp. 98–108).

Virginity and Marriage

Traditionally, Christianity saw sexuality as an important yet very dangerous aspect of human existence. Ever since the church fathers, the spiritual existence and the purity of the soul were held in higher esteem than the fleshly, bodily existence of man and his sexuality. Over time, Christian denominations like Catholicism developed a sexual morality that equated sexuality with sinfulness, as something that has to be under severe control to preserve man's purity (Eder 2018, pp. 129–172).

Theologically, this belief is reflected in a three-step hierarchy that links different levels of sexual renunciation with three ‘states of life.’ In this concept, virginity was placed at the top, the chaste widowers in the middle and married and procreating people at the bottom (Hunter 2007, p. 596). According to this view (that had already been developed in antiquity), virginity is the highest possible state of spirituality. Hence, virginity was featured very prominently in Catholic discourses of sexuality. Great numbers of publications were exclusively or in part devoted to this topic. Thereby virginity was seen as a preferred lifestyle not for the clergy alone, but also for believers who as laypersons wanted to devote their lives to the spiritual or who were not yet in marriage's safe haven and therefore needed guidance to preserve

¹ For example, the *Karlsruhe Virtual Catalog*, accessible under <https://kvk.bibliothek.kit.edu/>.

their purity. As a theological concept, virginity is not limited to the exclusion of sexuality alone but means a life in utter devotion towards the spiritual. However, since sexuality was seen as the most succinct realization of the worldly, material side of human beings, its exclusion from virgin life was of the utmost importance. Doing justice to its high value, devotional books rhetorically framed virginity as “the most beautiful virtue” (this is the title of Zwerger 1876) or a “treasure of the soul” (Lerch 1901b, p. 3). A virgin life would be the best guarantee for ascending to heaven after one’s death, the books told their readers (Donin 1877, p. 7).

Following this line of thought, consequently, the discourse on virginity constructed sexuality *ex negativo*: sexuality appeared as (the ultimate) threat to salvation, as something that had to be avoided if one wanted to keep one’s purity. Therefore, the booklets primarily were comprised of warnings about various threats to sexual morality that typically occupied the bulk of the publications. For example, readers were informed that a major source of temptation would lie in the senses, especially in seeing, since seeing indecent things or actions could lead to replicate them (Donin 1877, p. 28). Related thereto was reading, especially novels that could negatively influence the phantasy, thus leading to immoral deeds. The theater would have an even stronger influence due to its more realistic way of depiction (Hellweger 1890, pp. 234–251). Later, with the advent of commercial movie theaters, these lists were complemented accordingly (see for example Könn 1922, p. III). Also, the craving for admiration and with it the urge to dress up, putting on make-up, etc. was seen as highly suspicious and a major problem for women (Lerch 1901b, p. 41). A further threat that was often discussed was dancing, since it entailed direct physical contact to members of the other sex (Hellweger 1890, pp. 256–257).

To not fall into the trap of these moral threats, the brochures advised their readers to find strength in prayer, reception of the sacraments, and confession (Prattes 1879, pp. 16–33; 37–52). A proper virgin would, moreover, adopt a lifestyle of seclusion to avoid moral threats altogether (Lerch 1901b, p. 43).

Rhetorically, the discourse was characterized by a very emphatic language as can be seen in a book by Johannes Zwerger, prince-bishop of Seckau in Austria, who apostrophized sexuality as “impure desire”:

The impure desire is a murderous fire and the tempter is a diabolical arsonist and the unchaste thoughts are fire sparks. It is easy to extinguish the first spark, but difficult to become lord of the fire when everything is already set ablaze (Zwerger 1876, p. 90).

The use of metaphors such as the fire-metaphor above enabled two things: Firstly, it facilitated understanding, since metaphors produce a vivid and instantaneous comprehension of causal relationships or transformations from one state of being to another (Charteris-Black 2017, pp. 9–10). Secondly, it ensured to speak about the unspeakable (that in the context of virginity is sexuality) without using any explicit terminology. This kind of oblique rhetoric is thus necessary for a self-contradictory discourse that, due to its own propositions and taboos, needs a more indirect way of speaking about its subject.

Should the recipients not adhere to the proposed rules of conduct, the analyzed books were very clear in explaining the consequences: they would ‘fall’ and lose

their purity. Even though prayer and repentance could help to live a chaste life again innocent, and with it the high moral status of virginity would be gone forever (Prattes 1879, pp. 30–38). However, ‘falling’ was not limited to spiritual consequences alone. Sinful behavior would furthermore have severe bodily ramifications. Sexuality would affect “the marrow of the body, desiccating its juices and destroying its health” (Hellweger 1890, p. 225). Other texts were even more explicit, stating that the fallen virgin would suffer from “disgraceful diseases; the rotting by living body occasionally occurs” (Zwenger 1876, p. 118). The consequences of such sinful behavior would, moreover, not be restricted to the individual person alone. Unchaste sexuality would affect entire families leading to jealousy, hatred, and divorce, which would ultimately result in the moral undermining of the whole society (Saglio 1906, pp. 206–207).

The concept of virginity was not confined to religion alone but played a role in wider public as well. Since the eighteenth century, the bourgeois gender order increasingly tried to limit female activity to domestic spheres of action. Focusing on housewifely labor and reproductive duties, female activity was understood as crucial support for the maintenance of society. Only women who would keep their purity—by premarital virginity and chastity throughout marriage—were considered competent to fulfil these tasks. Virginity thus gained its importance as *sine qua non*, as something without which the continued existence of the bourgeois society allegedly could not be ensured. Even though men should be good husbands, virginity was not understood as male life plan. For bourgeois circles, the notion of virginity furthermore served as distinctive feature to distinguish the own lifestyle from other social classes (Bernau 2007, pp. 143–146). The Catholic concept of virginity did not know class distinctions. It should allow for a life beyond worldly matters, contrary to bourgeois reasoning. Theologically, virginity was understood as a concept of life for both men and women. However, my analysis has shown that the actual discourse on virginity was gendered, conceptualizing only women as virgins. Men and male behavior were not discussed in books on virginity. The texts included detailed descriptions for female virgin life that circled the notions of quietness, seclusion, and self-denial that were praised as appropriate behavior for women (Prattes 1879, p. 68). Generally, the vast majority of publications that discussed sexuality focused on female sexuality. Just a few publications were explicitly devoted to men (see for example Stolz 1900).

Besides virginity, marriage was one of the main topics in Roman-Catholic sexual discourse. Dating back to the teachings of Saint Augustine, theologically procreation was considered as the main purpose of marriage (Brownson 2013, pp. 110–111). Marriage could minimize the dangers of sexuality, thus facilitating a morally decent life of the spouses, so the theological considerations (Maassen 1998, pp. 207–223). However, the increasing secularization of European societies that had also led to a stronger separation of the church from state saw the German-speaking countries introduce civil marriage laws during the 1870s. The laws, unlike the canon law, allowed for divorce and remarriage and caused lasting protests of the Roman-Catholic church (Gestrinch et al. 2003, pp. 375–379; Köhler 2017, p. 216f.) Feminists, civil rights campaigners, and socialist parties criticized marriage (on their own grounds) as a patriarchal, oppressing institution and applauded the new civil marriage laws

(Arni 2004, p. 37). For many contemporaries, marriage thus seemed to have lost its potential to ensure social cohesion, leading to the perception of a general “crisis of marriage” around 1900 (Putz 2011, pp. 137–138).

Hence, Roman-Catholic marriage booklets were quite clear in their condemnation of civil marriage. Furthermore, they warned about so-called mixed marriages between Catholics and Protestants that now had become a legal option (Lerch 1908, pp. 40–41). Besides the typical marriage manuals, entire publications were devoted to this topic, warning their readers about the moral dangers of forbidden marriages between Catholics and Protestants (see for example Stolz 1875).

However, publications on marriage had the delicate task to inform about the permitted kinds of sexuality that were an essential part of marriage. Consequently, they had to tackle the subject in a much more differentiated way than did the virginity manuals. To mark the distinction between unchaste and legit sexuality, marriage’s main purpose, procreation, was highlighted. The readers of a repeatedly issued marriage brochure by the German priest Carl Rieder, for example, could learn the following:

Therefore, all that the spouses do in the performance of conjugal duty is ennobled by the purpose intended by God; they serve the Creator in the exercise of conjugal intercourse, they do the will of God (Rieder 1929, p. 11).

All sexual acts that stood in contrast to the conjugal duty of procreation thus were against the will of God himself, and hence deemed sinful. Such transgressions were framed as “desacralization of the conjugal bed” (o. A. 1917). Typically, marriage manuals devoted whole sections to condemning pre- and extramarital sex, unchaste sexual practices, masturbation, abortion, and contraception (see for example Glöckl 1899, p. 17; Heyret 1900, p. 179; Lerch 1901a, pp. 42–43). Some books stayed very vague in their description of forbidden sexual practices and simply demanded “to always live as is suggested by nature” (Oeser s.a., p. 7).

Even though the booklets primarily reiterated traditional notions of Catholic sexual morality, the marriage discourse saw subtle changes over time. Speaking about mutual masturbation, one book mentioned that,

It would be a sin to satisfy one another outside of conjugal intercourse out of pure sensuality or to satisfy oneself, while mutual tenderness is permitted for the reasonable grounds of affection of the spouses (Rieder 1929, p. 13).

Here, a more permissible stance towards self-satisfaction is discernible. Later, this shift was even sanctioned by papal authority. In the encyclical *Casti Connubii* (On Christian marriage) that was issued on 31. December 1930 pope Pius XI. reaffirmed the sanctity of marriage and the absolute ban of artificial birth control and abortion. The encyclical has to be seen as a response to the Anglican church’s 1930 Lambeth Conference that authorized birth control in specific situations. The Roman-Catholic church, in contrast, wanted to uphold their marital teachings that had already come under pressure due to the diagnosed ‘crisis of marriage’ (Schuck 1991, p. 51). In *Casti Connubii*, the pope introduced “secondary ends” besides the procreation of offspring:

For in matrimony as well as in the use of the matrimonial rights there are also secondary ends, such as mutual aid, the cultivating of mutual love, and the quieting of concupiscence which husband and wife are not forbidden to consider so long as they are subordinated to the primary end and so long as the intrinsic nature of the act is preserved (Pius XI. 1930, para. 59).

Through the theological bypass of “secondary ends,” mutual masturbation became a legitimate practice as long as the primary end of procreation was not inhibited, and masturbatory practices did not become sexual ends in themselves. Compared to older views, this can be seen as a concession to the increasing appreciation of sexuality in romantic relationships (Putz 2011, pp. 133–136).

Taking a closer look at the argumentative approaches that were used, it can be determined that during the 1920s, a new kind of argumentative strategy became more frequent. In contrast to older texts that were firmly rooted in the moral theological context of marriage, newer publications deployed a more science-oriented style of argumentation that took social consequences of marriage into account and referenced scientific findings as proof. For example, whereas older texts simply equated abundance of children with morally intact and healthy marriages the newer publications introduced a different reasoning based on the notions of health and disease. In a bridal teaching pamphlet by the Austrian priest Franz X. Bobelka, one could read: “Idiots, imbeciles, the one’s afflicted with contagious diseases shall not marry as they would bequest their ailments and defects to their progeny” (Bobelka 1921, p. 6). Another booklet that was written by the Jesuit priest and university theologian Albert Schmitt explicitly mentioned the importance of the gonads in the formation of the sexes (Schmitt 1921, p. 11). Authors also referred to famous scientists of the time such as August Forel or Richard von Krafft-Ebing as authorities (Scholl 1914, p. 125). Especially medical knowledge was used as source. However, the authors used such quotations in a selective way. Medical doctors were cited as authorities as long as their views were in line with Catholic teaching. To establish a line of argumentation that links marriage abuse with disease the authors cited medical practitioners without a doubt, as can be seen in the following example in Carl Rieder’s marriage booklet:

In complete agreement with this [= Catholic marriage teachings, the author], a doctor says of the abuse of marriage only for mutual sensual satisfaction: "As healthy as the institution (of marriage) is when it comes naturally to use, so in the long run unhealthy is everything that is applied in sexual intercourse to thwart the purpose of instinct in its end. Not only for the man does this procedure (of abuse of marriage), long applied, bring a source of nervous diseases, but these methods also bring sometimes considerable damage to the woman’s sexual apparatus, not to mention the mental conflicts and nervous consequences caused by the unnatural satisfaction of the reproductive instinct of a naturally sentient woman. The increase of nervous sufferings, often in physical effects, in our modern times often finds its source in this overflowing, unnatural way of life" (Dr. med Rh. Liertz, Wanderings through the healthy and sick inner life, 33f.) (Rieder 1929, pp. 15–16).

Rieder here refers to a book of the medical doctor Rhaban Liertz whom he introduces as “in complete agreement” with Catholic teachings before directly quoting a long passage from one of his books. By doing so, Rieder uses Liertz’s medical authority to strengthen his own argumentation. However, Rieder only uses passages that are unproblematic from a Catholic point of view. That Liertz himself was one of the rare Catholic proponents of psychoanalysis is not mentioned here (Ziemann 2014, p. 226). If medical authorities warned of the risks of further births (that could threaten the life of the mother), thus contradicting Catholic viewpoints, their authority was criticized as unfounded or exaggerated: “On the other hand, nothing is more unfounded than too much fear of heavy births.” (Rieder 1929, p. 18).

The marriage discourse was gendered in the same way as the virginity discourse: Women were seen as primary recipients, and the instructions were focused on the figure of the mother, not the father. Men were framed as head of the family, and women had to subordinate themselves to their instructions in every regard (Vater 1916, p. 8). Female subjectivity was exclusively linked to motherhood, devotion to children and family, and living in the privacy of the home that was interpreted as a woman’s natural habitat. In this respect, the Catholic ideal resembled the traditional gender roles of the bourgeois society (de Ballaigue 2010, pp. 150–157; Demel 2010, p. 45).

A good example for the gendered qualities of the marriage discourse are the books from the pastor and writer Wenzel Lerch. In one of his booklets, women could read that the subordination under their husbands was an intelligent arrangement by the church. It would grant the functioning of both the family and the society as a whole. Thus, women would actually benefit from it. When explaining the theological concept of the man as head of the family, Lerch highlighted that men would naturally be stronger, would have a superior intellect, and would take decisions guided by principles. Women, on the other hand, would be weaker, and would be led by their heart and feeling. Due to their weakness, they would tend to be fearful and timid. Hence, women would need a man as guide (Lerch 1901a, pp. 4–6). The following quote shows how the desired female subordination was realized rhetorically:

So, if your heart is on fire because of the trifle of a match, you must quickly extinguish it—by admitting your own guilt, or at least your complicity: ‘My God, he was in a bad mood; he had a displeasure; he did not want to offend me! If he were like me, sniveling and sensitive! I should have met him kindly! I should have kept silent!’ (Lerch 1901a, p. 14).

In case of marriage problems, women were demanded to blame themselves or at least admit a certain complicity. The text itself already provides the desired reaction of the women by prescribing how to behave and what to think. In contrast, the man is excused and his good qualities, such as not being oversensitive, are highlighted.

However, even in the marriage discourse, the reaction to the scientification of sexual discourse can be seen. Catholic authors willingly cited medical authorities that highlighted the importance of breastfeeding for the health of the child. They interpreted these findings as scientific proof for the correctness of their religious gender ideology that equated women as ‘natural’ mothers. The book market saw separate publications from Catholic authors on this topic that promoted the idea of

breastfeeding (the pastoral theologian Wenzel Grosam (1924) for example published “a moral and pastoral theological investigation on the importance of the mother’s breast,” based on his 1923 doctoral dissertation with the same subtitle).

Conceptions of Male Sexuality

As already mentioned, the Catholic sexual discourse primarily focused on the discussion of female sexuality. Detailed discussions of male sexuality are rare, even in books written explicitly for men. However, some of the books briefly commented male sexuality. Generally, the importance to avoid opportunities to sinful behavior, as explained above for female virginity, also applied to men. Accordingly, authors warned of frivolous talk, doubtful friendships, or the potential dangers of literature and theater (Egger 1895, p. 231; Pesch 1909, p. 97). The main characteristic ascribed to male sexuality was its alleged forcefulness. Contrary to conceptions of female sexuality, male sexuality appeared as a strong, violent, and autonomous drive (Gröber 1935, p. 36; Hammer 1904, pp. 100–105). Therefore, the authors concluded that temperance and self-restraint would be the most important qualities of men. Only if a man would be master of his drives—and not vice versa—he could consider himself a ‘real’ Catholic man. A good example for this construction of masculinity is Philip Hammer’s instruction book for fathers. After criticizing the alleged lustfulness of the contemporary youth, Hammer makes clear that temperance would be the only way to reach this kind of Catholic manliness. Should they not adhere to these rules than “such young men may become all kinds of things: Men, truly Christian men will they not become.” (Hammer 1904, p. 105).

Due to man’s alleged instinctual nature which would make him prone to illicit sexual acts, some of the books explicitly discussed the sinfulness of a coitus interruptus:

Remember what punishment Onan received when he committed a sacrilegious attack against nature. Away with the heinous accomplishments of an unscrupulous present! Back to the faithful performance of one’s duty, even if, as is now the case, it costs great sacrifices (Metzler 1931, p. 37).

Here, the author refers to Onan, a character from the Old Testament, to instruct the readers not to perform any illicit sexual acts.² The “accomplishments” of the present, in this context, refer to contraceptives, whose usage is forbidden, as the quote implies. Like their female counterparts, also the books for men highlighted that sexuality would only be allowed within marriage, that procreation was the main objective, and that all other sexual acts would be sinful and against God’s and the church’s law. Hence, the authors concluded that only a married man who abides religion’s rules could be a true Catholic man (Metzler 1931, p. 132).

² Contrary to his name, Onan did not commit onanism or masturbation but wasted his semen with a coitus interruptus and thus got punished by God.

Even though temperance was seen as an important male quality, none of the books favored a virgin life for men. Men were always supposed to live ‘in the world,’ to be active and creative agents of society, at the best in the form of married fathers. Men should generally exercise their sexuality, however, only within marriage. Attributes of virginity like seclusion and self-denial, that featured so prominently in books written for women, were not considered to be an option for men.

Catholic Reactions to the Scientification of Sexual Discourse

Over time, Roman-Catholic publications more and more had to react to secular topics of sexual discourse. This can be understood as a reaction towards the changing sexual discourse around 1900. Eder (2009 pp. 187–209) described this development as politicization and medicalization of sexuality. Since Catholic authors wanted to maintain their authority over sexual morality, they had to deal with the new debates actively and increasingly engaged themselves in discussions about new topics such as fertility decline, prostitution, the fight against venereal diseases, or the importance of sexual education for children and youth.

One important topic that caught the interest of Catholic writers very early was an alleged fertility decline. Cultural commentators of the *fin de siècle* were convinced that modernization had led to a fertility decline that could threaten the continued existence of the civilized nations (Eder 1999, pp. 159–161). This diagnosis only became possible by a continuous scientification of social policy debates that can be traced back to the Enlightenment era of the eighteenth century. New fields of scientific inquiry such as demography, population statistics, or degeneration theories that had been developed by medical and biological research facilitated the quantification of ever new aspects of society and allowed for prognosis and hypothesizing (Oosterhuis 1999, pp. 228–230). Intensive research in those areas established (natural) scientific reasoning as an argumentative benchmark. Especially the medical categories of health and disease became powerful devices for the framing of the debates, thus strengthening medicine as the leading academic discipline (Giami 2011, pp. 127–130).

The Roman-Catholic sexual discourse increasingly made use of this new kind of reasoning. Simultaneously, the authors interpreted disease and degeneration as direct consequences of the perceived general moral decay. The fight against moral decline already was a well-established agenda of church politics for a long time. In the early twentieth century, however, the church saw itself obliged to intensify the “fight against public immorality” as one 1908 pastoral letter proclaimed (Gatz 1985, p. 121). Shortly before the outbreak of World War I, the topic of fertility decline also set the agenda of the 1913 bishops conference in the German town of Fulda. The conference in Fulda was the most important of its kind, where bishops from the whole Germany regular met to discuss important topics of the time. The conference participants explicitly identified “moral decadence” (Gatz 1985, p. 224) as a driving force behind the fertility decline, especially modern literature and the press, together with the undermining influences of social democracy were assumed to pose a threat to public decency. Popular missions to sensitize the conscience of married couples,

more explicit instruction for the believers, and support for the governments in the fight against contraceptives were discussed as promising remedies (Gatz 1985, p. 224).

Generally, the fight against moral decadence remained a major topic in official church announcements and pastoral letters for years to come, sometimes leading to a busy publication schedule. This can be illustrated by taking a closer look at publications from the diocesan level. The Austrian bishops, for example, felt obliged to condemn the so-called “modern morality” in a pastoral letter in 1918 (o. A. 1918). The bishops then repeated this condemnation in 1923 and 1926 when they protested against modern habits such as civil marriage, naturism, or the coeducation of boys and girls in public schools (o. A. 1923, 1926b). Besides that, they held a conference on the topic of the bridal exam³ in 1925 to sensitize the clergy to the importance of marriage teachings to maintain Catholic morals (o. A. 1926a). Nineteen twenty-five also saw the release of a new publication series called *Katholische Hefte* (*Catholic Booklets*) whose first edition in its entirety discussed moral issues (o. A. 1925). In 1927 the bishops issued a ban on modern dances while the following year, 1928, again saw the publication of a pastoral letter that condemned “modern morality” (Gföllner 1928; Piffel 1927).

As already mentioned, Catholic authors identified “moral decadence” as the main cause of the alleged fertility decline. Following this moralizing understanding, they strictly distinguished between the demographic decline due to war losses during World War I and the decline of fertility rates due to moral decadence. Accordingly, the readers of a war-time pastoral care booklet by the German theologian Adam Keller could learn that,

a feverish, insatiable death stoked by passion creeps through the country since years, heaping hundreds of thousands of human lives away with cold calculation and wreaking bigger devastation in state and church than the current World War with its cannons and other fire maws (Keller 1917, p. V).

In this quote, the declining fertility rate is metaphorized as a fever, that is a potentially life-threatening sickness, which would spread in an ‘insatiable’ way. However, this process would advance with ‘cold calculation’, implying that it is wanted or even controlled by certain social actors. The use of emphatic language was common throughout the publications, as can be seen in the following example that framed fertility decline as “genocide”:

Whoever loves his fatherland, the bloodless genocide will be crueller to him than the bloody murders of the World War. Because this cannot permanently depopulate the country thereby weakening it such as the system of self-annihilation that has come to us from England via France (Hessenbach 1915, p. 5).

³ The bridal exam is a mandatory prerequisite according to the canon law (can. 1067). Besides the clarification of legal issues, the bridal couple is provided with information regarding marital duties such as procreation. See Wiebel-Fanderl (2007, pp. 344–347).

The quotes illustrate the understanding that “moral decadence” would be a threat to the Catholic social order. Typical for the texts is the recurrent use of the topos of ‘decadent’ and ‘degenerate’ Western European countries such as France or England, where fertility control and the use of contraceptives was more common. France was indeed among the first European countries that witnessed a population decline in the nineteenth century. However, such references were not aimed at an objective discussion of demographic change but rather used to point out the dangers of modern society’s ‘decadence’ (Szreter 1999, p. 166). The texts thus constantly referred to the allegedly higher fertility rates in Catholic regions that were interpreted as proof for the superior morals of Catholicism compared to other denominations and the *Zeitgeist* in general (Hessenbach 1915, p. 8; Keller 1917, p. 6f.).

Especially the economic theory of Malthusianism was seen as a threat to Catholic marriage teachings. Malthusianism stated that population growth would eventually exceed the production of food and the availability of natural resources, thus leading to massive societal conflicts. Only systematic control of a population’s reproduction could prevent demographic collapse (Cook 2006, p. 19). However, contrary to Malthus’ recommendation, population control would be accomplished by use of contraceptives and not through abstinence, thus weakening Catholic marriages. In combination with the vain women’s clothes that would have harmed the inner organs and the widespread alcoholism among men, this would have produced vast numbers of sterile couples that would not procreate anymore (Hessenbach 1915, pp. 10–18). Such arguments connected the alleged moral reasons for fertility decline with biological consequences. The lack of morality thus appeared as catalyst to a development that inscribed itself into the individual as well as collective body. By means of the concept of degeneration, moral decadence and the extinction of the nation could be connected argumentatively.

The following example shows that scientific concepts were accepted as different conceptualizations of the same subject matter and even as an argument for Catholic teachings:

What reason and experience witness is confirmed by the biological and medical sciences. The unbreakable wedlock is the most beneficial for the individual. It moderates the sex life and thus saves juices and powers that are used for the conservation of the organism. Every polygamy—and the temporal marriage is just a prolonged polygamy—is a threat for the individual. No less does it harm population growth (Könn 1922, p. 23).

Here, Catholic marriage is proclaimed as a prerequisite for bodily health. This ‘fact,’ based on Catholic “reason and experience” would now have been verified through the sciences. Decadent practices such as “temporal marriage”—the contemporary jargon for a modern lifestyle of divorces and remarriages that had become more popular since the inception of civil marriage—would harm individual and collective health, as is highlighted in the following example:

Most of all it [=temporal marriage, the author] impairs the quality of the offspring. The permanent monogamy is, according to the laws of heredity, the

best way for the achievement of superior individuals, it crafts that what we call tribe and national character (Könn 1922, p. 24).

Even though Catholic authors referenced scientific concepts such as the laws of heredity or degeneration theory to validate their own teachings, they remained skeptical towards scientific or political concepts of eugenics.⁴ One of the authors qualified eugenics as exaggerated and inhumane, as something that reminds “too much of animal breeding” (Keller 1917, p. 29). Additionally, eugenics would grant the nation state a disproportionate right of interference with the most intimate matters that could not be approved (Keller 1917, p. 29). That Catholicism itself deliberately wanted to interfere with such intimate matters was not mentioned.

Since the turn of the century, also venereal diseases (VDs) were being discussed. The debates got reinforced through World War I and engaged cultural commentators till the 1920s. Prostitution was seen as a primary source of the alleged increase of infections with VDs. Since the one was interpreted as the direct consequence of the other, prostitution and VDs were normally discussed as one topic. Here, a transformation of the vocabulary of morals into the language of health and disease reflected the scientification of society (Allen 1993, p. 27f.; Davidson and Sauerteig 2000, p. 127). The topic became especially prominent throughout the war. Military conscription affected the majority of the male population and led to temporary separation of spouses. During this time, men on the front, as well as women on the home front, often established new sexual contacts (Sauerteig 1999b, p. 167f.). Therefore, the sexual behavior of soldiers became important because the national military capabilities were dependent on the troops’ health (Überegger 2006, p. 353). The war also brought about the stepwise implementation of eugenic measures that, until then, primarily had been merely theoretical considerations (Kühl 2014, p. 67f.). Generally, the debates strengthened the double standard of sexual morals. While the male sex drive was seen as natural and legitimate, active sexual desire of women was considered deviant and threatening. This view was especially problematic for prostitutes. By means of their ‘natural’ drive, men were excused in their longing for sex. Prostitutes were criminalized and seen as morally inferior beings that were a threat to decency and morality (Janssen 2011, p. 180). As Sauerteig (1999a, pp. 68, 80) has pointed out, neither an increase in prostitution nor in VDs can be demonstrated since statistical evidence of the time is doubtful and definitions of prostitution were subject to considerable change over time.

However, for contemporary Catholic writers, it seemed clear that they had to deal with a major spread of prostitution and VDs. Johann Ude, a Catholic theologian and university professor, identified a combination of social causes such as unemployment, the economic inability to marry, and the alluring modern lifestyle in big cities as reasons for moral decadence and biological degeneration (Ude 1920, p. 17). He issued several pamphlets on the topic that were published through his own

⁴ There was a diverse Catholic engagement with eugenics, especially in the Weimar Republic. The most prominent name in this regard is Hermann Muckermann, a Jesuit and eugenicist. However, this is beyond the scope of the present paper. For further information see the extensive study by Richter (2001).

association.⁵ He referred to the topos of the big city to explain why men would fall victim to prostitutes:

Obviously, the nerve-wrecking hustle and bustle of the big city with its temptation pushes the sexually much more easily excitable man too easily on the paths to prostitution, so that he falls victim to the attraction of the harlots who want to seduce the men (Ude 1920, p. 19).

Interestingly, Ude opted against state regulation of prostitution. In doing so, he expressed a position closely related to the so-called abolitionists. State regulation, according to them, would criminalize female prostitutes while male clients would remain untouched by legal prosecution. This system was believed to be the major support for the bourgeois double standard (Herzog 2011, p. 10). However, Ude's commitment was not focused on greater social justice for women, but the strict observance of Catholic teachings. He equated state regulation as a public call to indecency and violation of the 6th commandment and, therefore, as something deeply unethical.

Generally, authors like the German priest and politician Joseph Mausbach (1916, p. 34) rejected the claim of contemporary medical practitioners to use contraceptives at least in the context of prostitution to keep infection levels with VD's low, since this still would be a violation of Church teachings. Furthermore, the booklets criticized women's economic emancipation and their increasing integration in the job market. Attracted by the promises of the modern capitalist society, they would become prone to see prostitution as a legitimate way to earn money, thus promoting the spread of VD's (Hitze 1917, p. 46).⁶

Besides discussions on prostitution and VD's, the church had to react to the growing discourse on sexual education as well. Triggered by emerging theories on infantile sexuality from disciplines such as psychology and psychoanalysis, sex reform movements made attempts to establish sex education in most European countries at the beginning of the twentieth century (Sauerteig and Davidson 2009, pp. 2–3). Officially, the Roman-Catholic church remained silent on this topic for years. Guiding principles were then proclaimed by Pope Pius XI.'s 1929 encyclical *Divini Illius Magistri* (On Christian education). Aside from general education principles the encyclical devoted some remarks on sexual education and explained that,

another very grave danger is that naturalism which nowadays invades the field of education in that most delicate matter of purity of morals. Far too common is the error of those who with dangerous assurance and under an ugly term propagate a so-called sex-education, falsely imagining they can forearm youths against the dangers of sensuality by means purely natural, such as a foolhardy initiation and precautionary instruction for all indiscriminately, even

⁵ Johann Ude had gained notorious popularity for his ethical rigorism that even brought him trouble with the official Roman-Catholic church. His booklets did not receive an imprimatur, however, he strictly adhered to church teachings. For more information see Farkas (1997), o. A. (2005).

⁶ Hitze's publication does not hold an imprimatur. However, he was theologian and priest and adhered to church teachings.

in public; and, worse still, by exposing them at an early age to the occasions, in order to accustom them, so it is argued, and as it were to harden them against such dangers (Pius XI 1929, para. 65).

Even though the Holy See was highly critical of any kind of sexual education, believers sought advice from the clergy. In the German-speaking area, the Fulda bishops conference had thus issued guidelines on sexual education already in 1913, stating that “the sexual education of the youth has to be treated with the utmost caution and restraint” and that it has to be understood as “education to shamefacedness and high esteem of chastity” (Gatz 1985, p. 214).

These points were generally taken into account by Catholic sex education brochures—all in all, the publications aimed at promoting Catholic sexual morality. However, Catholic writers claimed they would not just reiterate old teachings under new headings. In fact, their language changed (at least in parts) with the intention to keep track of social developments and to remain accessible to young people that were seen as prime recipients. Sex education booklets explicitly pointed out that sexuality would be nothing bad or sinful per se (Ernst 1906, p. 19; Schmitz 1932, p. 13f.). Compared to older writings that typically framed sexuality as a potential threat to morals this has to be seen as fundamental change, at least rhetorically. To be accessible to a new generation of potential readers the booklets pointed out that adolescents could “no longer find sufficient support in the forbidding norms of the sixth and ninth commandments to shape their sexual life. The eternal ‘Thou shalt not!’ and ‘Thou must not’ has put her off” (Schmitz 1937, p. 9). Nevertheless, Catholic authors were strictly against open or even public discussions of sexual matters. Following the recommendations given in *Divini Illius Magistri*, the publications highlighted that sexual education must not take place in public schools (i.e., state-run institutions), since secularization in this context was interpreted as a severe threat to church authority. Moreover, the publications took a stand against secular sex education materials such as books, brochures, lectures, or films. Such resources would have an excessive focus on the natural or mechanic component of sexuality, thus neglecting the moral side of things which would make them harmful for proper religious education (Bertram 1929, pp. 34f., 38; Ernst 1906, pp. 27f., 103ff.; Gatterer 1927, p. 31; Schmitz 1932, pp. 3, 12). For Catholic authors it seemed clear that secular sex education with its more open approach to sexuality, the body, and relationships had the potential to undermine Catholic notions of morality and the social order and therefore has to be opposed.

The fierce rejection of secular sex education can also be seen in the almost complete lack of engagement with psychoanalytic approaches towards the topic.⁷ The only mentionable exception is a book by Rudolf Allers (1934) called

⁷ Catholic authors had been rejecting psychoanalytical knowledge because it was seen as a materialistic, deterministic, atheist theory with an excessive emphasis on human drives that (especially in its Freudian version) was characterized by a strong accentuation on sexuality (Ziemann 2014, pp. 225–227). As Foschi, Innamorati and Taradel (2018, p. 95) have pointed out, psychoanalysis gained greater acceptance within the church only when the focus on libido and sexuality faded in favor of other theoretical approaches in the 1960s.

Sexualpädagogik. Grundlagen und Grundlinien (Sexual Pedagogy. Foundations and Fundamentals). Allers, a devout Catholic who was trained by Sigmund Freud, later became a critic of psychoanalysis's secular approach towards the human psyche. His work focused on combining Catholic teachings with psychoanalysis and this stance is also evident in his sex education book that effectively reiterated Church teachings and received a Catholic printing license (McEwen 2009, p. 163).

Remarkably, Catholic authors advocated the first sex education instructions already in early childhood (contrary to the suggestions given in *Divini Illius Magistri*) when children's first questions would arise. They must be given appropriate answers; otherwise, wrong assumptions could develop that later would inhibit the formation of an earnest Catholic morality, so they assumed. A crucial topic was the proper use of the genitals. It would be important to teach children and youth that genitals were impure parts of the body, and it would be forbidden to play with them or even touch them unless for body hygiene. To inculcate these rules, the brochures recommended teaching children that illicit touching of the genitals would lead to diseases. The body would have to be seen as a temple of the holy spirit; unchaste touches would insult Christ himself (Gatterer 1927, p. 8f.; Schmitz 1932, p. 18). Although Catholic writers acknowledged the need for modernized rhetoric in sexual matters, they still used a very explicit and probably discouraging language, as was typical for Catholic sexual discourse. However, even reformist sex education groups of the time like social democrats made use of prescriptive and threatening rhetoric, as McEwen (2012, p. 59) pointed out in her study on left reform movements in Vienna.

Despite the premise that sex education was important, the books remained relatively silent on explicit instructions. Detailed explanations of bodily interactions were refused. In a booklet by Adolph Bertram, prince-bishop of Wrocław (then a part of the Weimar Republic), parents could learn that sex education first and foremost should be guided by caution and restraint. The parent's role would be,

to supervise the children and to recognize in time in the eyes and sounds of the children what becomes restless inside. Then a short word of instruction, enlightenment, reassurance or warning is enough to offer the young understanding, without scholarly biological arguments, what it initially only suspects, but which then slowly clears itself up without school-like revelations through harmless occasional remarks (Bertram 1929, p. 36).

Generally, comparisons and hints should explain sexuality's bodily dimension. For instance, parents could allude to their children's observations of animals or preferably plant pollination to provide them with a basic understanding. However, the most important thing would be to highlight that children would come directly from God (Gatterer 1927, pp. 20–49; Schmitz 1932, pp. 17–26). In summary, the authors tried to offer a Catholic version of sex education besides the emerging canon of mostly progressive, social reformist publications. In doing so, they mostly reiterated the traditional Catholic sexual morality with a slightly adapted rhetoric.

Conclusion

What does the analysis of the Roman-Catholic sexual discourse from the 1870s to the 1930s show? Firstly, the Roman-Catholic discourse on sexuality changed in form and content in the course of time. During the last decades of the nineteenth century, two traditional topics of Catholic sexual morality prevailed: virginity and marriage. With these two topics Catholic authors framed the sexual discourse as a moral discourse. Consequently, authors justified their propositions with recourse to moral theological argumentations and passages from the Holy Scripture. The discourse was centered on the individual believer and (since it was gendered) the female moral conduct. With the beginning of the twentieth century, the propositions began to change, and the medicalization and politicization of sexuality influenced even Catholic authors. Like their scientific counterparts, they engaged in discussions on VD, prostitution, the alleged fertility decline, or sexual education. In combination with these new topics, they more and more made use of scientific reasoning and quoted scientific (mainly medical) authorities. Eventually, scientific modes of explanation became the major line of argumentation to the disadvantage of traditional argumentations like quotations from the Bible or exemplary stories about saints. The traditional modes of argumentation were apparently no longer convincing enough to rely on them alone. What was at stake for Catholic authors was nothing less than the credibility of their religious worldview. To remain accessible for larger audiences, more secular argumentations—such as those delivered by the sciences—were necessary. Scientific logic, and rhetoric, seemingly ensured a higher extent of credibility.

However, the interaction with the secular discourses of science was ambivalent. Scientific explanations were warmly welcomed and referenced as long as they could be used as proof for Catholic sexual morality. When they contradicted or challenged church teachings, they were devalued as exaggerated or downright wrong. Nevertheless, the Catholic sexual discourse entered a phase in which the writers mainly reacted towards the secular discourses around them. Therefore, they had to cover scientific topics and adopt a more science-oriented style of reasoning and writing, even though the objective still was the promotion of the Catholic sexual morality. The increasing use of scientific argumentation patterns shows that the traditional Catholic sexual morality had already lost ground that was thought to could be reclaimed by adaptations in both rhetoric and argumentation.

With these adaptations, the evaluation of sexuality changed as well. The collective aspects of sexuality, e.g., questions of health and disease, were highlighted. Sexuality no longer was a battlefield for individual morality and spiritual salvation, but it was closely connected to questions of social welfare and the persistence of the Catholic community. At the same time, the concept of sinfulness, heavily emphasized by older publications, at least partly lost its importance. Notions such as ‘nature’ or ‘health’ became more important instead. The scientification of sexual discourse thus had a profound impact on how the Catholic sexual morality had to be justified in an increasingly secular environment. In other words: Catholic rhetoric and argumentation had to be adapted so that Catholic sexual morality could be conveyed as still acceptable and adequate for a modern society.

Secondly, it is discernible that the discourse was gendered. Women were the primary addressee of Catholic writings that discussed sexuality. Mainly, it was female sexuality that was problematized. Women were imagined as the ‘weak sex’ that had to be safeguarded, and that needed the protection of strong, active men. Since their sexuality was seen as dangerous they were given just two options to realize their libidinal life: (1) either as virgin that completely renounces her sexual feelings in favor of a life devoted to prayer, seclusion, and self-denial or (2) as mother that fulfils her ‘natural’ and religious duties by giving birth to children, raising them, and being a (subordinated) partner to her husband. Even in the case of a supposedly gender-neutral topic such as virginity that theologically is conceived as an option for both men and women (and finds a very prominent realization in the celibate male clergy) the discourse was, to a large extent, based on the discussion of female sexuality. The feminization of religion (for a recent research overview see Schneider 2016) indeed made its impact on the publications analyzed here. Even though a Catholic discourse on masculinity emerged at the end of the nineteenth century, and Catholic authors were conscious about changing gender roles, sexuality primarily was discussed through the lens of femininity (Schneider 2014; for a discussion of research on Christian masculinities see Werner 2018). However, the prevalence of discussions on female sexuality expressed a superordinate fear of Catholic dignitaries. Modernity and its achievements, from secular marriage to sexual education, threatened the nuclear family and thus Catholicism’s major foothold within society. Since women were perceived as the main upholders of the Catholic family ideal, female behavior was the crucial topic. Hence, Catholic authors primarily focused on womanhood and female sexuality. As a result, discussions of male sexuality were neither very common nor extensive. Conceptions of male Catholic sexuality originated from the notion of a forceful and violent male sex drive. Since a virgin life was not considered an option for men, the writings highlighted the importance of marriage to keep the male sex drive under control. Generally, authentic Catholic manliness would be dependent on virtues like temperance and self-control.

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Conflict of interest The author declares that he has no conflict of interest.

Ethical Approval This article does not contain any studies with human participants or animals performed by any of the authors.

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