Foucault Studies

INTRODUCTION

Foucault and Religion – Guest Editor's Introduction

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Since James Bernauer's seminal 1990 analysis that Michel Foucault's oeuvre is an ethical "force of flight" beyond the "prisons of [modern] man," analogous to a negative theology,[1] scholars, from a range of disciplines have examined the significance of religion within Foucault's work, and also the significance of Foucault's work for discourses of/on religion. New perspectives have been opened up within fields such as religious and cultural studies, Christian theology, philosophy of religion and biblical studies. In turn, the significant, multifaceted intersection of Foucault's work with religious concepts and themes has been gradually mapped and brought into focus.[2] In particular, the period from 1999 to 2005 saw the publication of several major studies with an increasing focus on the relationship between Foucault's work and forms of Christian theology. Jeremy Carrette, for instance, carefully elaborated the religious subtext of Foucault's writings; J. Joyce Schuld uncovered structural parallels between the operation of Foucauldian power and Augustinian love; Henrique Pinto elaborated a postmetaphysical Foucauldian theology of "the More;" while Johannes Hoff demonstrated the capacity of Foucault's work to deconstruct productively traditional theological discourses; and Bernauer and Carrette highlighted his conception of political practice in terms of a "mysticism of revolt" in the late 1970s, as well as the influence of his Catholic background upon his thought.[3] Two important collections of essays that explore the import of Foucault's work for theology were also published at this time.[4]

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[1] James W. Bernauer, *Michel Foucault's Force of Flight: Toward an Ethics of Thought* (London: Humanities Press International, 1990).

[2] For a review of the literature to 2005, see John McSweeney, "Foucault and Theology," *Foucault Studies* 2 (May 2005), 117-44.

[3] Jeremy R. Carrette, *Foucault and Religion: Spiritual Corporality and Political Spirituality* (London and New York: Routledge, 2000); J. Joyce Schuld, *Foucault and Augustine: Reconsidering Power and Love* (Notre Dame, Indiana: Notre Dame University Press, 2003); Henrique Pinto, *Foucault, Christianity and Interfaith Dialogue* (London: Routledge, 2003); Johannes Hoff, *Spiritualität und Sprachverlust: Theologie nach Foucault und Derrida* (Paderborn: Schöningh, 1999); James Bernauer and Jeremy Carrette, "Introduction. The Enduring Problem: Foucault, Theology and Culture," in Bernauer and Carrette (eds.), *Michel Foucault and Theology: The Politics of Religious Experience* (London: Ashgate, 2004), 1-16.

[4] See Christian Bauer and Michael Hölzl (eds.), *Gottes und des Menschen Tod? Die Theologie vor der Herausforderung Michel Foucaults* (Mainz, Grünewald, 2003); James Bernauer and Jeremy Carrette (eds.), *Michel Foucault and Theology: The Politics of Religious Experience* (London: Ashgate, 2004).

These studies not only point to a growing interest in Foucault's work among theologians. Rather, their 'theological' focus also reflects, in significant part, the early emphases of the so-called 'theological turn' in recent continental philosophy and elements of the broader 'postmodern turn' to which the latter arguably belongs. These 'turns' in continental thought, of course, attend to the aporias, which undermine the modern dream of a self-sufficient reason, constituted in sharp opposition to 'unreason' (not least, religion). As such, they argue for contemporary philosophies that would be open to the 'theological' as the 'Other' of rational discourse and call upon contemporary theological discourses to recognise the extent of their own implication in the modern project of a self-sufficient rationality. Thus, the increasingly theologically-oriented studies of Foucault's work of this period, do not simply tend toward theological appropriation of his writings, but typically belong to a larger moment of critique of modern philosophical and theological presuppositions, which would complicate the religion-reason divide, opening both philosophical and theological discourses to a permanent movement of critique.

While such a paradigm has clearly been productive for engagement with Foucault on the question of religion, two recent developments invite a certain rethinking of the question of 'Foucault and religion' today. First, continental thought has recently begun to think the relation of reason and religion within the more complex framework variously evoked by Jacques Derrida's later notion of the 'return of religion' (rather than his earlier preoccupation with deconstruction's relation of difference to negative theology) or the materialist conception of religion proposed by Alain Badiou, Slavoj Žižek and others.[5] The differences between these two approaches notwithstanding, they share in common the notion that, even if the relation between reason and religion, as well as our ability to think that relation, have been profoundly conditioned and complicated by the modern constitution of reason in opposition to religion, nonetheless, religion and reason each have a positive, historical, or material reality beyond that constitution. As such, the modern problematic of reason and religion remains a critical factor, but begins to be contextualised within a more complex historical perspective, in which their relation is a multidimensional, historical as well as philosophical *problem* to be negotiated, and then, within a larger complex of discourses, practices, institutions, and problems.[6] Implicit here is a critique of the extent to which the postmodern and (early) theological turns in continental thought remain entangled in the modern reason-religion problematic, insofar as

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[5] See Jacques Derrida, Derrida, "Faith and Knowledge: The Two Sources of 'Religion' at the Limits of Reason Alone," in Jacques Derrida and Gianni Vattimo (eds.), *Religion*, translated by David Webb (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1998), 1-78; Alain Badiou, *Saint Paul*: *The Foundation of Universalism*, translated by Ray Brassier (Stanford, California: Stanford University Press, 2003); in relation to Žižek see, for example, Slavoj Žižek, *The Puppet and the Dwarf: The Perverse Core of Christianity* (Cambridge, Massachusetts, and London: MIT Press, 2003).

[6] These positions do not, of course, depart entirely from conceptualisation of reason and religion as bound in a structural relationship to each other, insofar as Derrida broaches the possibility that religion may be that which, by its very nature, returns differently, and Žižek, in particular, inscribes reason and religion within the historical-rational movement of a Hegelian dialectics. Nevertheless, there is a clear departure from the narrower focus upon the 'Other' of discourse characteristic of the theological turn and postmodern critique.

they focus upon reason and religion as bound structurally in a relation of Otherness and are subsequently concerned to uncover deep resonances between apparently opposed discourses.

Following the work of the later Derrida, Badiou, and Žižek then, a space has opened in which it becomes possible to investigate and interrogate the contemporary problem of reason and religion, open to unanticipated possibilities beyond the terms of modern polemics, while taking the specificity and force of the modern Enlightenment project and the modern reason-religion problematic seriously; a space in which to assert the importance of religion to reason is not necessarily to evoke religious or theological questions or horizons, even as this possibility must be given due weight. Crucially, such a space both appears to have parallels with aspects of Foucault's own approach to religion and to be apt to the interrogation of religion as a factor or problem circulating within Foucault's own texts, as well as offering new perspectives on the significance of religion within his work. Moreover, these developments, not least the materialist readings of religion by Badiou, Žižek, and others already generate novel deployments of religion in contemporary thought, with which Foucault's work ought to be brought into dialogue.

The second important development of recent years is the publication of a number of Foucault's later lecture courses at the *Collège de France* and, indeed, the availability of Foucault's corpus of Iranian writings in English.[7] These not only invite renewed examination of Foucault's engagements with religion, but enable scholars to pursue the kind of textured study —called for by recent continental thought—of his engagements with early modern Christian mysticism, Islamic political spirituality, and early Christian practices of the self in relation to the broader themes of his evolving project from the mid-1970s until his death in 1984. It becomes possible to understand the complex matrix within which these engagements arise and the problematisations to which they belong and which characterise them.

The papers presented in the current volume represent a number of distinct, initial forays into the new dimensions of the question of 'Foucault and religion' opened up by these developments. My hope is that these papers together indicate the rich possibilities that remain to be explored in relation to 'Foucault and religion' and encourage further research in this direction.

Matthew Chrulew brings Foucault's work into dialogue with the so-called 'politics of love,' emerging in the writings of Badiou, Žižek, Hardt and Negri, and others and conceived of as a necessary alternative to the inadequacy, to political transformation, of the 'deconstructions' of Foucault and his generation. Where the 'politics of love' characteristically distinguishes between the fragile moment of true Christian love and its aberrations, Chrulew argues that Foucault's genealogy of Christianity suggests that Christian 'love' is already implicated in modern discourse and practice, because modern biopower involves not a secularisation as

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[7] As well as the courses on biopower from the late 1970s of particular importance has been publication of the courses from 1982 to 1984 : Michel Foucault, *Le Herméneutique du Sujet: Cours au Collège de France, 1981-82*, edited by Frédéric Gros (Paris: Gallimard Seuil, 2001); Michel Foucault, *Le Gouvernement de Soi et des Autres: Cours au Collège de France, 1982-83*, edited by Frédéric Gros (Paris: Gallimard Seuil, 2001); Michel Foucault, Le *courage de la vérité, Le Gouvernement de Soi et des Autres II : Cours au Collège de France, 1983-84*, edited by Frédéric Gros (Paris: Gallimard Seuil, 2001). See also, Janet Afary and Kevin B. Anderson, *Foucault and the Iranian Revolution: Gender and the Seductions of Islam* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005), 179-277.

such, but a Christianisation-in-depth. Moreover, Chrulew demonstrates how Foucault's analyses reveal that it is the very capacity of Christian love to effect transformation, which is the source of its more troubling dimensions. Thus, Foucault is shown to point to the complex Christian heritage complicating modern appeals to love as a locus of critical practice.

While acknowledging the shortcomings of Foucault's writings on Iran, Corey McCall contests the notion that they constitute a fundamental aberration in relation to his other writings of the period. In particular, he questions the idea that Foucault's appeal to the "political spirituality" of the revolution is an acknowledgement of the failure of his analytics of power. Instead, McCall proposes that these writings are precisely an extension to the Iranian context of what he terms the "genealogy of biopower," which Foucault was undertaking in his other works of the period, especially *Security, Territory, Population*. He argues that the notion emerges from Foucault's Iranian writings that there exist multiple projects of modernity, which are ambivalently 'modern,' and that it is precisely the complex history that relates and opposes Shi'ite spirituality to the ambiguously modern archaic modernism of the Shah, which gives "political spirituality" its specific historical force within the revolution.

Through a close reading of *The Hermeneutics of the Subject*, Foucault's 1982 course at the *Collège de France*, Jeremy Carrette highlights the ambiguities and instabilities of Foucault's use of the term 'spirituality' to designate practices of the self in his later writings. Foucault, he argues, subtly depends on the capacity of pre-modern discourses of spirit to undergird the idea of transformation through subjective practices of care of the self. As such, Foucault finds himself in a paradoxical position: he constructs a distinctively modern, post-Enlightenment discourse of *rupture* through an effective appeal to the *continuity* between such pre-modern and modern discourses of transformation. Carrette concludes that Foucault's later work indicates how spirituality continues to play a significant role within contemporary discourses of transformation, complicating any clear modern distinction between the religious and the rational.

My contribution to the issue re-examines Foucault's engagements with religious concepts and practices within the context of his ongoing concern to construct a consistently immanent discourse after, and in the shadow of, the death of God. I argue that Foucault's repeated attempts to inscribe an immanent discourse without a transcendent(al) remainder, from his writings on Bataille through to his analysis of power, inadvertently and problematically inscribe his work within an indirect theological horizon which threatens to undermine the immanence of his discourse. I propose, however, that Foucault rethinks his relation to the finite limit of thought in the late 1970s, such that openness to the possibility that thought and action may ultimately depend on transcendent(al) structures of being, becomes the paradoxical condition of a consistently immanent discourse. I argue that Foucault's openness to the importance of Christian mysticism, Islamic political spirituality, and early Christian practices of the self to modern critical thought and practice, exemplify this transformed negotiation of the finitude and limits of would-be immanent discourse.

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