

ARTICLE

Rupture and Transformation: Foucault's Concept of Spirituality Reconsidered

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ABSTRACT: Using Foucault's conceptual frame from *The Archaeology of Knowledge* to read Foucault's late deployment of "spirituality," this article argues that Foucault's enigmatic gesture in using this concept reveals a refusal of "rupture" from the Christian pre-modern discourse of "spirit." Despite attempts to alter the "field of use," Foucault's genealogical commitment ensures a Christian continuity in modern discourses of transformation. In a detailed examination of the 1982 *Collège de France* lectures, the article returns Foucault's use of "spirituality" to the Alexandrian joining of philosophy and theology and the specificity of Christian practice and belief.

Keywords: Foucault, spirituality, Christianity, modernity, rupture.

By spirituality, I understand—but I am not sure that it is a definition which we can hold for very long—that which precisely refers to a subject acceding to a certain mode of being and to the transformations which the subject must make of himself in order to accede to this mode of being,¹

The deployment of the concept of "spirituality" in Foucault's writings, and in subsequent discussions in Foucauldian scholarship, is surrounded by an enigmatic gesture. This gesture is Foucault's 1984 interview comment—quoted above—that his definition of spirituality is unsustainable. It reflects something of the historical tension of the concept in Foucault's thinking and the ambiguity of "religion" in Foucault's work. The enigmatic gesture is primarily related to the creative attempt by both Foucault, and Pierre Hadot, to use "spirituality" and "spiritual" to reflect practices of self transformation in the Greco-Roman and Christian world and their attempt to draw out a distinct deployment of the "spiritual" that separates the word from its Christian theological associations, but which is simultaneously burdened with such history.² This separation is a distinct modern rationality, which seeks to establish a "rupture" of

¹ Michel Foucault, 'The Ethic of the Care of the Self as a Practice of Freedom' (1984) in James Bernauer & David Rasmussen (ed.), *The Final Foucault* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1991), 14, emphasis added.

² It is striking in terms of the re-emergence of the discourse of spirituality in the post-war era, from its seventeenth-century modern emergence, that Hadot refers to the 1957 *Dictionnaire de Spiritualité* (for example, Pi-

spirituality from the “religious” or “theological.” The difficulty is that this “rupture” requires the metaphorical spectre of “spirit” to indicate forms of transformation and change. This modern deployment of spirituality has increased since the 1960s as its institutional and social field of use has shifted beyond “religion” to wider forms of modern individualism and the market economy.³ In such a world, the signification of “spirituality” is dispersed and new historical contexts and applications emerge. Moreover, vagueness and ambiguity give it force and vitality in the liberal market.⁴

Spirituality increasingly becomes part of what John Gray calls the “myth of modernity.”⁵ The myth attempts to insulate past and present through the discourses of science and democracy. It separates the discourses of politics and philosophy from “religion” and highlights the irrational representations of “religion” against the so-called logic of the “secular” world.⁶ The discourse of spirituality becomes splintered inside this myth of modernity as the need for representing ethical qualities and values, finitude and otherness, and changes in meaning and action become imperative for individuals and groups reacting against the dominating forces within society. The sheer historical weight of the discourses of spirit, and the metaphysical demand to acknowledge the limits and change within human existence, mean that it is profoundly difficult to find languages of inspiration or formation that do not at some point echo older discourses regarding this concept. Spirituality as a discourse is part of the economy of historical utterances that seek to speak outside, or appeal to something greater than, the historical present in validating the choices of human life and action. The capacity of spirit to depict this force of “transformation” means that it, inescapably, becomes a point of contestation within modern discourse as it seeks to avoid its pre-modern theological ramifications.

These issues become significant in the debates about whether Foucault intended “spirituality” to be philosophical or theological, and they reinforce the confusions which rest deep within ancient history. Such that Karen Vintges, in critique of my earlier work, rejects the religious sub-text in reading spirituality in Foucault and seeks to position Foucault’s reading of the term strictly within the Greco-Roman philosophical tradition and freedom practices.⁷ This

erre Hadot, *Philosophy as a Way of Life*, edited by Arnold I. Davidson, (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1995), 141, notes 11 & 31). For a genealogy of the term spirituality see Jeremy Carrette & Richard King, *Selling Spirituality: The Silent Takeover of Religion* (London: Routledge, 2005), 30-53.

³ See Paul Heelas and Linda Woodhead, *The Spiritual Revolution: Why Religion is Giving Way to Spirituality* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2005) and Carrette & King, *Selling Spirituality*.

⁴ See Carrette & King, *Selling Spirituality*.

⁵ John Gray, *Al-Qaeda and What it Means to be Modern* (London: Faber & Faber, 2004), 1-4.

⁶ See William T. Cavanaugh, *The Myth of Religious Violence: Secular Ideology and the Roots of Modern Conflict* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009) and Timothy Fitzgerald, *Religion and Politics in International Relations: The Modern Myth* (London: Continuum, 2011).

⁷ Karen Vintges, “Endorsing Practices of Freedom: Feminism in a Global Perspective,” in Dianna Taylor & Karen Vintges (eds.), *Feminism and the Final Foucault* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2004), 288. I appreciate that Karen Vintges’s work is seeking to assert Foucault’s intentions in using “spirituality,” however I am seeking to address his enigmatic gesture and his dividing practices at the roots of his genealogy. I am looking not at what he attempts to do, but what he does beneath the surface. I am seeking “a level that eludes the consciousness”—his “unconscious of knowledge”—discovered in the slippages and continuities. I

issue has taken on greater weight since the publication and secondary examination of Foucault's 1982 *Collège de France* lecture course, where the question of spirituality takes on a new significance. However, these questions do not find any simple answer, because Foucault did not have one reading of "spirituality" and even those readings of "spirituality" that seek a philosophical adoption of the "spiritual" are themselves displaced by Foucault's own genealogical sources taken from Christian history. It may be, as Bruno Latour suggests, that the modern desire to achieve "rupture" is not such an easy ambition and that perhaps "we have never been modern."⁸

The difficulty is reinforced by the translation of "la direction de conscience" as "spiritual direction," an elision of ancient philosophical practices with theological discourse.⁹ The translation ignores Foucault's reluctance to use the discourse of "spirit" and blurs the specific references to Antiquity and Christian theological practices; such that "la direction de conscience dans l'Antiquité était circonstancielle" becomes "spiritual direction in Antiquity was circumstantial," obfuscating Foucault's own attempt to demarcate the Christian and Ancient.¹⁰ All these confusing lines of discussion suggest that some deeper reflection on the enigmatic gesture of "spirituality" is an important task. It is also significant because, as John McSweeney has argued, "evaluation of the significance of Foucault's deployment of the term 'spirituality,' and the extent of its 'religious' and 'mystical' connotations, will be crucial to the dialogue between theology and Foucault going forward."¹¹ The enigmatic gesture cuts across the modernist myth of "rupture" and takes us to the heart of Foucault's engagement with the history of religion.

In this paper I want to argue that Foucault's uneasiness in using the term "spirituality" reflects a refusal of "rupture" in modernity and the persistence of Christianity in modern discourses of transformation. I wish to demonstrate that Foucault's late use of "spirituality" relates precisely to the way it carries forward the pre-modern theological imagination and that theology and philosophy are deeply entwined. What I wish to entertain is the idea that Foucault's admission, that his definition of "spirituality" might not be sustainable, reflects the fact that the term does not carry out the work it seeks to achieve; both in terms of rupture and transformation. The problem is that both Foucault and Hadot depend on the Christian legacy of the term, even as they seek to create a specific deployment against such usages. "Spirituality" thus becomes a peculiar modern dilemma in Foucault's plurality of engagements, in the

read Foucault with other parts of Foucault, applying his critical methods to his own texts, in order to reveal what is lost or silenced (Michel Foucault, *The Order of Things*, translated by Alan Sheridan, (London, Routledge, 1991), xi).

⁸ Bruno Latour, *We Have Never Been Modern* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1993), 10-11.

⁹ See, for example, Michel Foucault, *Sécurité, Territoire, Population, cours au Collège de France, 1977-1978*, (Paris: Gallimard/Seuil, 2004), 185/ Michel Foucault, *Security, Territory, Population*, edited by Michel Senellart, translated by Graham Burchell, (New York, Palgrave Macmillan, 2009), 181.

¹⁰ "La pratique de la direction de conscience n'est pas, au sens strict du terme, une invention chrétienne. Il y a eu des directions de conscience dans l'Antiquité..." (Foucault, *Sécurité, Territoire, Population*, 184) The translation of "la direction de conscience" to "spiritual direction" confuses this with Foucault's Christian monastic reading.

¹¹ John McSweeney, "Foucault and Theology," in *Foucault Studies*, No. 2, May 2005, 143.

deficient translations and the desires of scholars to either celebrate or expunge the theological. It is a concept within Foucauldian scholarship that demands an ethical commitment to the modern politics of “rupture” and “transformation.”

In order to demonstrate my argument, I will briefly read Foucault with Foucault and return to *The Archaeology of Knowledge* to show how the dynamic of “rupture” and “transformation” become part of the modern legacy of reading “spirituality.”¹² I will seek to carry out an archaeology of Foucault’s concept of spirituality in the sense that, “[a]rchaeology describes discourses as practices specified in the element of the archive.”¹³ After detailing the archaeological frame of my reading of modernity and rupture, I will begin by briefly mapping the different periods of Foucault’s use of “spirituality” and then analyze the 1982 *Collège de France* lectures to show how the enigmatic gesture of spirituality reflects the persistence of Christianity—not least in the Alexandrian School and its bridging of theology and philosophy. My aim will be to show that the enigmatic gesture surrounding “spirituality” reflects a problem of “rupture” from the Christian past in modernity. It will show how “spirituality” holds a refusal of “rupture.” Even with the qualifications given by Foucault and Hadot, the Christian roots of the concept persist in their own archive—it demands a qualification of the rules from which they speak and an acknowledgement of a limit in their deployments of “spirituality” or “spiritual.”¹⁴

Rupture and Transformation: The Archaeology of Spirituality

Archaeology disarticulates the synchrony of breaks, just as it destroyed the abstract unity of change and event.¹⁵

Rupture, along with threshold, break, mutation, and transformation is a central part of Foucault’s archaeology of knowledge and returning to archaeology to read Foucault’s notion of “spirituality” can help us make sense of the specificity of its deployment and the unease it creates in Foucault’s work. In his analysis of the “rules of formation” of discourse in *The Archaeology of Knowledge*, Foucault articulates the importance of discontinuity and difference and seeks to break up the silent continuity and unity of a discourse, but he is also aware that there is an “interplay of relations,” a “dispersion of elements,” and “a tangle of continuities and discontinuities.”¹⁶ If, as Foucault indicates, “rupture is the name given to transformations that bear on the general rules of one or several discursive formations”, then we might say that Foucault’s hesitation with his own definition of “spirituality” is a concern with the “field of stabilization”—that which “makes it possible, despite all the differences of enunciation, to repeat them [statements] in their identity.”¹⁷ As with all discourses, Foucault’s discourse of “spiritu-

¹² See note 7 for a brief comment on my method.

¹³ Michel Foucault, *The Archaeology of Knowledge*, translated by Alan Sheridan Smith (London: Routledge, 1991), 131.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 130.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 176.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 28, 72, 176.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 103, 176-177.

ality" is shaped by an *archive*—"the law of what can be said, the system that governs the appearance of statements as unique events."¹⁸ Foucault's hesitation about spirituality reflects a tension in the archive; an archive of Christian discourse preserved in its institutions and practices.

The archive, according to Foucault, reflects the "rules of a practice that enables statements both to survive and to undergo regular modification."¹⁹ In this respect, Foucault's unease with using "spirituality" reflects something of the problem of transforming the concept and its "discursive formation." It is by describing Foucault's discourse that we can find something that remains at the threshold of his own utterances of "spirituality," something that returns us to the Alexandrian conjunction where philosophy and theology are joined. When the modern subject returns us to such historical moments, there is a refusal of modernity and a "rupture" between these subjects; it marks an anxiety of transformation. We might go as far to suggest, in bringing archaeology and spirituality together in Foucault's work, that rupture and transformation collapse together, because the modern attempt to articulate "transformation" (spirituality) with the discourse of spirit faces the dilemma of modern "rupture" (transformation). Foucault's enigmatic gesture is one of refusing modern rupture for a logic of transformation, which depends in part on the discourse of Christian "spirit." In this sense, the specificity of Foucault's use of "spirituality" reveals the limits of modernity to articulate its own transformation.

Before we describe Foucault's late discourse on spirituality, I want briefly to frame it as a development of earlier usages from his 1960s atheological and surrealist "spirituality" and his 1970s "political spirituality." I will not dwell on these earlier usages, because they have been detailed elsewhere.²⁰ My aim here is to focus on the enigmatic gesture of "spirituality" in the late Foucault, but it is worth noting that earlier deployments exhibit the modernist tension in the conjunction of spirit with the domain of the body and the political as counter-discourses. Foucault uses a distinct synthesis of pre-modern and modern discourses of spirit to great effect.

The use of spirituality, during Foucault's literary period in 1960s, was influenced by Bataille and avant-garde literature.²¹ That Foucault links spirituality and sexuality in his essay on Bataille illustrates the traditional religious (Christian) origin of this terminology, even as it was being used outside such a religious epistemology. We might call this, following Bataille,

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 129.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 130.

²⁰ See Clare O'Farrell, *Foucault: Historian or Philosopher?* (London: Macmillan, 1989); James Bernauer, *Michel Foucault's Force of Flight* (London: Humanities Press, 1990); James Bernauer & Michael Mahon, "The Ethics of Michel Foucault," in Gary Gutting (ed.), *Foucault: The Cambridge Companion* (Cambridge: University of Cambridge, 1994); William Connolly, "Beyond Good and Evil: The Ethical Sensibility of Michel Foucault," *Political Theory*, 1993, vol. 21, no. 3, 365-89; Jeremy Carrette (ed.), *Religion and Culture by Michel Foucault* (Manchester: Manchester University Press/ New York: Routledge, 1999); Jeremy Carrette, *Foucault and Religion: Spiritual Corporality and Political Spirituality* (London: Routledge, 2000); James Bernauer & Jeremy Carrette, *Foucault and Theology: The Politics of Religious Experience* (London: Ashgate, 2004); Janet Afary and Kevin Anderson, *Foucault and the Iranian Revolution* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005).

²¹ Carrette, *Foucault and Religion*, 44- 84.

an “atheological” reading of spirituality.²² Foucault’s displacement and use of spirituality was part of his attempt “to determine what thought is without applying the old categories.”²³ In the attempt to reconfigure modernity he used the concept of spirituality because it still echoed the history of, what I am calling, a ‘discourse of spirit.’ Importantly, at this stage Foucault used the word “spiritual” (in quotation marks), but suggested that it “is not quite the right word” and yet its signifying persistence continued to betray the modern rupture.²⁴

A second use of spirituality can be seen in Foucault’s concept of “political spirituality” during his work from 1977 to 1979, particularly in relation to the Iranian revolution. Political spirituality was a resistance to modern Western governmentality and an attempt to find some form of society outside the regimes of humanism. As Foucault remarked:

The search for a new foundation for each of these practices, in itself and relative to the other, the will to discover a different way of governing oneself through a different way of dividing up true and false – this is what I would call ‘political *spiritualité*’.²⁵

We learn from the 1977-1978 *Collège de France* lectures, *Sécurité, Territoire, Population* that Foucault (during his first discussion of pastoral power²⁶) reinforces a distinction between “dimensions spirituelles” and “extensions temporelles” to mark out two political orders.²⁷ The theological weight of political spirituality enables Foucault to establish a new horizon for human subjectivity, the ambiguity of spirit, wherefore its pre-modern legacy is less of a concern.

In both these earlier cases, spirituality is used as a “counter-discourse,” which deploys the concepts in a specifically French “laïc” (secular) context—with all the Catholic undercurrents of French society—to displace the instrumental rationality of modern thought.²⁸ In this sense, it always operated on the signifying border between its Christian and non-Christian usage. The tension in the usages of “spirituality” reflects the power of cultural symbolism in religious language, even as it was rejected in the modern rupture of scientific rationality of the day. Because it is impossible to separate theology and philosophy, the attempt to establish a modern rupture of spirituality from Christianity unravels. Indeed, this is striking in Foucault’s late 1980s use of spirituality. However, before I plot the key theological roots of spirituality in late Foucault, I want first to map the 1982 use of “spirituality” in detail.

²² George Bataille *Inner Experience* (New York: SUNY Press, [1954] 1988).

²³ Michel Foucault, “The Debate on the Novel,” (1964) in Carrette (ed.), *Religion and Culture*, 74.

²⁴ Foucault, “The Debate on the Novel,” 72; Carrette, *Foucault and Religion*, 45.

²⁵ Foucault, *Security, Territory, Population*, 82.

²⁶ For a discussion of pastoral power in Foucault see Jeremy Carrette, “Foucault, Religion and Pastoral Power,” in Timothy O’Leary, Christopher Falzon & Jana Sawicki (eds.), *A Companion to Foucault* (New York: Blackwell), 2013, 368-383.

²⁷ Foucault, *Sécurité, Territoire, Population*, 235.

²⁸ *Spiritualité* as a “counter-discourse” is given some justification in Foucault’s 1978 course where he refers to *spiritualité* in the 16th and 17th century as a “contre-conduite” (counter-practice). See Foucault *Sécurité, Territoire, Population*, 205, 234.

Late Transformations: Philosophy and Spirituality

The discursive construction of spirituality in Foucault's later work owes much to scholars of antiquity and the central problem of how philosophy relates to discourses of spirit. It rests principally, as Edward McGushin points out, on the work of Pierre Hadot—a professor of Hellenistic and Roman thought.²⁹ The interweaving of philosophical and Christian ideas becomes extremely complex in this set of engagements and entails the sophisticated emergence of Christianity in a Neo-Platonic world, particularly in the Alexandrian school of the second century AD. The problem is both the cross fertilization of ideas between Greco-Roman thought and Christianity and the modern hermeneutical reconstruction of this relationship, where concepts fold endlessly upon each other. In this instant, Foucault becomes entangled in the quagmire of these debates. It is, therefore, necessary for us to separate the various stands of this discussion. Before we can do that we must, however, locate this issue in the 1982 lectures.

Frédéric Gros holds that the 1982 lectures are fascinating because of the “critical” importance they assume in the conceptual development of Foucault's work.³⁰ Foucault thus moves to explore the “relation between subjectivity and truth” and shifts the project of the history of sexuality from a concern with *aphrodisia* and sexual behaviour towards a new relationship to the self. As he explained in 1983, this was a move from examining the ethical substance (*substance éthique*), or the focus of the ethical task, to the mode of subjection (*mode d'assujettissement*), or the way individuals are driven towards the moral obligation, inside the self-forming activity (*pratique de soi*).³¹ As is well-documented, this phase of Foucault's work not only saw a change of historical period, moving from modernity to the classical Greco-Roman material, but also a change of language and conceptual thought, referring, as he did, to the “aesthetics of existence,” the “practices of the self,” “techniques of existence” and “care of the self.” According to Foucault, this last notion of the “care of the self,” *epimeleia heautou* (Greek) and *cura sui* (Latin), had been lost in modern philosophy—not least through Descartes' notion of “know thyself” (*gnōthi seauton*). Foucault argues that “care of the self” had been central to Greek, Hellenistic, Roman, and early-Christianity thought.

If this notion of the care of oneself, which we see emerging quite explicitly and clearly from the figure of Socrates, traversed and permeated ancient philosophy up to the threshold of Christianity, well, you will find this notion of *epimeleia* (of care) again in Christianity, or in what, to a certain extent, constituted its environment and preparation: Alexandrian spirituality.³²

²⁹ Edward McGushin, *Foucault's Askēsis: An Introduction to the Philosophical Life* (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 2006). I am grateful to Edward McGushin for private email correspondence on his work and the issues of “spirituality” on the 18th September 2005.

³⁰ Frédéric Gros, “Course Context,” in Michel Foucault, *The Hermeneutics of the Subject: Lectures at the Collège de France, 1981-1982*, edited by Frédéric Gros, translated by Graham Burchell (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005), 491, 493.

³¹ Michel Foucault, “On the Genealogy of Ethics: An Overview of Work in Progress,” in Paul Rabinow (ed.), *The Foucault Reader* (London: Penguin, 1991), 352-355.

³² Foucault, *The Hermeneutics of the Subject*, 10.

It is poignant that Foucault's first introduction of the word "spirituality" in the 1982 course is in the context of Alexandria, precisely because it is, as I will demonstrate, the question of Alexandria that establishes the problematic threshold of spirituality and philosophy in Foucault's work, but also in Hadot. Foucault, of course, also discusses the Christian development of *epimeleia* (care of the self) in early Christian asceticism, in writers such as Basil of Caesarea and Gregory of Nyssa, but the issue is still about the exchange of ideas between ancient philosophy and early Christianity. In order to unravel the tapestry of references to spirituality in the 1982 lectures, it is necessary to develop a closer reading of the text, particularly in relation to the definitions offered in the 6th January lecture and the hints in the discussion to the Christian tradition. The tension written across Foucault's use of spirituality is the movement between spirituality as part of the discourse of Christianity (a religious discourse) and spirituality as "a transformation in the subject's being" in philosophy (a philosophical discourse).

The second reference to spirituality in the 1982 course, discusses *epimeleia* as a set of exercises performed on the self by the self. These transform the self through exercises such as techniques of meditation, memorization of the past, examination of conscience and checking representations in the mind.³³ He argues that these exercises have a long destiny "dans l'histoire de la culture, de la philosophie, de la morale, de la spiritualité occidentales" ["in the history of Western culture, philosophy, morality, and spirituality."]³⁴ The important fact in this list is that philosophy and spirituality appear as distinct categories of classification. This distinction will eventually operate alongside a more philosophical representation, but one constructed—albeit submerged in the analysis—through the Christian discourse.

The linguistic shift occurs because Hadot and Foucault want to capture something about *epimeleia*, "une formulation philosophique précoce" ("an early philosophical formulation") and to show how its millennial development occurs from the 5th century BC up to the 4th and 5th century AD. Again, Foucault does not render the philosophical practice as spiritual, but does refer to "la spiritualité chrétienne" (the Christian spirituality). While Foucault's main question is why such a tradition was superseded by "know thyself" (*gnōthi seautou*), my question is why the discourse of spirit best captures this tradition in Hadot and Foucault when it is not part of *epimeleia* until the Christian era? Moreover, there is a refusal of "rupture" in the modern deployment of the terms "spirituality" and "spiritual." The reason for this is not immediately apparent from Foucault's texts and it will demand a detour into Hadot and Alexandrian Christianity, but for the moment we need to understand how Foucault sets up the parameters of the discussion and how he defines both philosophy and spirituality, especially when putting forward designations prefaced with such phrases as "si vous le voulez bien" ("if you like") or "appelons" ("we will call"), which hide a deeper critical elision.³⁵ However, the connection between spirituality and philosophy is important in understanding how immanence and transcendence work in human experience and how such discourses change with, what Foucault called in 1969, the "enunciative field."³⁶

³³ Foucault, *The Hermeneutics of the Subject*, 10-11; Michel Foucault *L'Herméneutique du sujet, Cours au Collège de France, 1981-1982* (Paris: Gallimard-Le Seuil, 2001), 12-13.

³⁴ Foucault, *The Hermeneutics of the Subject*, 11; Foucault *L'Herméneutique du sujet*, 13.

³⁵ Foucault, *The Hermeneutics of the Subject*, 15; Foucault *L'Herméneutique du sujet*, 16.

³⁶ Foucault, *The Archaeology of Knowledge*, 99.

In the attempt to separate two forms of philosophy, particularly marked out by post-Enlightenment formations, Foucault designates philosophy as “what determines that there is and can be truth and falsehood and whether or not we can separate the true and false” and “what it is that enables the subject to have access to the truth.”³⁷ Following the assumption that “if” this is philosophy “then” Foucault believes it possible to designate spirituality in relation to this subject. I will quote in full.

If we call this “philosophy,” then I think we could call ‘spirituality’ the search, practice, and experience through which the subject carries out the necessary transformations on himself in order to have access to the truth. We will call ‘spirituality’ then the set of these researches, practices, and experiences, which may be purifications, ascetic exercises, renunciations, conversions of looking, modifications of existence, etc., which are, not for knowledge but for the subject, for the subject’s very being, the price to be paid for access to the truth.³⁸

[Eh bien, si on appelle cela la ‘philosophie,’ je crois qu’on pourrait appeler ‘spiritualité’ la recherche, la pratique, l’expérience par lesquelles le sujet opère sur lui-même les transformations nécessaires pour avoir accès à la vérité. On appellera alors ‘spiritualité’ l’ensemble de ces recherches, pratiques et expériences que peuvent être les purifications, les ascèses, les renoncements, les conversions du regard, les modifications d’existence, etc., qui constituent, non pas pour la connaissance mais pour le sujet, pour l’être même du sujet, le prix à payer pour avoir accès à la vérité.]³⁹

Foucault then outlines, in a “very schematic survey,” three characteristics of this philosophical-spirituality: the *transformation* in the subject’s relation to truth, the *forms* of this access, or work of the self in *eros* (love) and *askēsis* (asceticism), and, the *effects* or consequences, such as enlightenment or tranquillity.⁴⁰ Foucault believes that there is “an enormous objection” to what he says about these things from Gnosticism (where transformation occurs inside knowledge rather than practice). Behind this objection is the problem of separating the metaphysical quality of spirituality in the Christian tradition from the central question of, what we can call following Foucault’s own words, the “structure of a spiritual act.”⁴¹ Echoing Georges Dumézil’s own structuralist reading of Indo-European mythology, Foucault establishes a link between philosophy and spirituality by exploring religious symbols in terms of the *structure* of the world order (or practices of self). This was an inheritance from Hadot who, as a member of the 5th section of École Pratique des Hautes Études, would also have been drawn into a school of thought influenced by Dumézil. By taking each of the three characteristics of spirituality in turn, I want to show how Foucault’s definition of spirituality in the 1982 course is built on a functionalist reading of spirituality. Also, I will demonstrate how this creates a tension with Christian discourses of spirit from which it is taken. In this process I will establish the lines of transmission of Foucault’s thinking on spirituality and its refusal of “rupture.”

³⁷ Foucault, “The Ethic of the Care of the Self as a Practice of Freedom,” 14; Foucault, *The Hermeneutics of the Subject*, 15;

³⁸ Foucault, *The Hermeneutics of the Subject*, 15.

³⁹ Foucault, *L’Herméneutique du sujet*, 16.

⁴⁰ Foucault, *The Hermeneutics of the Subject*, 15-16.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 16.

Transforming Knowledge

Transformation primarily unravels the central problem of spirituality as a discourse, because it questions the transcendent within Truth. In Foucault's 1983 essay on Kant and the Enlightenment, he made it clear that his form of critique is not concerned with the transcendent; wherefore, in the context of the work on the hermeneutics of the self, we may wonder why Foucault resorts to a discourse of spirit, which depends on such metaphysical assumptions.⁴² Foucault marks out the Truth-Transformation axis without recourse to ideas of spirit, but rather to practice (albeit a practice dependent on the structure of spirit). In its philosophical frame spirituality is seen as mode of practice, which assumes, or "postulates," a number of things about truth. Truth, under the rubric of spirituality, is "never given to the subject by right."⁴³ It is not given through knowledge ("connaissance") as such, but only when the subject is "changed, transformed, shifted" and becomes other than the present state of being. Foucault gives emphasis to this point by stressing it is the most fundamental aspect of spirituality.

I think that this is the simplest but most fundamental formula by which spirituality can be defined. It follows that from this point of view there can be no truth without a conversion or a transformation of the subject.⁴⁴

[Je crois que c'est à la formule la plus simple, mais la plus fondamentale, par laquelle on peut définir la spiritualité. Ce qui entraîne pour conséquence ceci: que, de ce point de vue, il ne peut pas y avoir de vérité sans une conversion ou sans une transformation du sujet.]⁴⁵

This fundamental aspect of transforming the subject's mode of being is underlined in the 1984 interview and begs the question of the nature of transformation in philosophy and the nature of transformation in Christian spirituality. As the 1984 interview reveals in response to Descartes' *Méditations*, the modern philosophical mind is critiqued as offering a mode of being "entirely determined by knowledge," it is "access to a knowing subject."⁴⁶ There is an attempt to "accede to a mode of being" without doubt and with knowledge alone, but this is *only* transformation at the level of knowledge and *not* for the entire subject, that is transformation lived and worked through with practices of the self. Foucault thus claims Descartes "superimposes the functions of spirituality on an ideal based on scientificity."⁴⁷ There is an imposition of transformation on knowledge, but this remains inadequate, because transformation requires more than knowledge. What is striking about this claim is that Foucault is in line

⁴² Michel Foucault, "What is Enlightenment?," translated by Catherine Porter, in Paul Rabinow (ed.), *The Foucault Reader* (London: Penguin, 1991), 32-50.

⁴³ Foucault, *The Hermeneutics of the Subject*, 15; Foucault *L'Herméneutique du sujet*, 17.

⁴⁴ Foucault, *The Hermeneutics of the Subject*, 15.

⁴⁵ Foucault, *L'Herméneutique du sujet*, 17.

⁴⁶ Foucault, "The Ethic of the Care of the Self as a Practice of Freedom," 14; see also Edward McGushin 'Foucault's Cartesian Meditations' in *International Philosophical Quarterly*, Vol. 45, No.1, Issue 177 (March 2005), 41-59.

⁴⁷ Foucault, "The Ethic of the Care of the Self as a Practice of Freedom," 14.

with Hadot, also using the “functions of spirituality” to read ancient spiritual practices, which in turn corresponds with his wider functionalist view of religion established from the work of Dumézil.⁴⁸ The functionalist reading takes the model transformation, but separates knowledge and lived practice. Let me explain the implication of this in relation to Christianity.

The discourse of Christian spirituality assumes a specific metaphysical quality in the transformation, a “conversion,” but for Foucault the elision of philosophy and spirituality occurs at the point that this dimension of Christian belief is eradicated from the history and texts explored. The ontological claim of “conversion” is distinct from “transformation,” but Foucault quickly slips from one to the other without comment.⁴⁹ This is significant because, in the Christian schema, the discourse of spirit informs conversion in very specific ways, but transformation can be without spirit. Why then frame the latter in terms of the former? This critique is similar to Hadot’s own critique of Foucault’s reading as being “*too* aesthetic” and ignoring the “cosmic dimension” of Greek philosophy.⁵⁰ As Davidson indicates, Hadot was not referring to the Christian belief system when pointing out the “cosmic dimension,” but the understanding of physics rather than just ethics, as in Foucault’s thinking.⁵¹ In this case Hadot is open to the same criticism of silencing the Christian belief system in his own reading of spirituality even as he shows awareness of its specificity. The question is precisely one of specificity, where Foucault rests on the functionalist transfer of a discourse of spirit to frame his own analysis. If, in Foucault’s view, Descartes seeks the functions of spirituality for scientific knowledge, then Foucault seeks the functions of spirituality for reading ancient philosophy, because he requires something of the discourse of spirit to inform the idea of transformation.

The second characteristic of this philosophical-spirituality describes a “movement” or something that changes the subject. There is a sense in which the movement of receiving truth is either through a “mouvement d’ascension” (“ascending movement”) or “*la vérité vient à lui et l’illumine*” (“the truth comes to him and enlightens.”)⁵² The Platonic framework is evident here and, of course, will form the basis of early Christian thought, particularly in Clement of Alexandria and, later, in Augustine. The dependence of Christianity on neo-Platonic thought and the cross fertilization of ideas, allows for easy structuring of language according to ideas of spirit, but the lack of specificity in referring to the Christian discourse, and its distinct understanding of spirit, is silenced in the intellectual tradition developed by Foucault, even in the account of early Christian writers. Foucault, for example, identifies *eros* (love) and *askēsis* (asceticism) as the two major forms through which the transformation occurs, but the “transformation” of these ideas in Christian discourse results in a very different metaphysical order, with extended discourses about God, the Holy Spirit, *agape*, and prayer. It is only through a

⁴⁸ Carrette, *Religion and Culture*, 38.

⁴⁹ Foucault, *The Hermeneutics of the Subject*, 15. The dynamics of “conversion,” and “confession,” alongside “transformation” takes on greater significance in ancient Christian practices of the self in Foucault’s studies of Christianity and monasticism, see Michel Foucault, “About the beginning of the hermeneutics of the self,” (1980) in Carrette, *Religion and Culture*, 158-181.

⁵⁰ Pierre Hadot, *Philosophy as a Way of Life*, 211.

⁵¹ Arnold I. Davidson, “Introduction,” in Hadot, *Philosophy as a Way of Life*, 24.

⁵² Foucault, *The Hermeneutics of the Subject*, 15-16; Foucault, *L’Herméneutique du sujet*, 17.

structural parallel that Foucault can employ the concept of spirituality across the thousand years of history he wishes to embrace, but the carry over of “spirit” reflects a conceptual debt to a specific discourse and practice.

The third characteristic Foucault entertains is the “effect” or what he calls the “de retour” (“rebound”) of truth. This is not simply some “reward” but something that “fulfils the subject himself.” As he writes: “The truth enlightens the subject; the truth gives beatitude to the subject; the truth gives the subject tranquillity of the soul.”⁵³ Foucault reads these “effects” in purely self-referential terms or, one might say, in terms of the “subject” itself. However, as we shall see, the Christian discourse goes much further in its claims in terms of reading the “transformation” inside the relationship with God. There is, of course, nothing wrong with following Foucault’s functionalist reading of Christian experience and even much value in such a practice, but why carry over a discourse of ‘spirituality’ to describe the ascension and coming of truth? Why is no other language sufficient? The tension in language rests on the axis of transcendence and immanence and Foucault’s peculiar rendering of “spirituality.”

According to Foucault, access to truth in the modern period is through knowledge without the accompanied transformation of the subject. Ironically, this results in the Christian discourse having only a quality of historical knowledge without transformation through its truth, resulting in the utilisation of its discourse for the purposes of classification and utility outside its own claim to truth. Foucault, “leaping over several centuries” (“faisons un saut de plusieurs siècles”), is caught in his own modern location of the discourse of spirituality, which shapes his reading of the ancient material. In the modern period, Foucault argues, the truth of knowledge does not “save” or “transfigure” the subject.⁵⁴ Knowledge is simply caught in the “indefinite dimension of progress” and the “institutional accumulation of bodies of knowledge.”⁵⁵ Foucault’s own discourse of spirituality is caught in these very same modern processes, the knowledge of spirituality no longer “saves” us, it merely functions as a classification of the ancient processes that once united the subject and truth in transformation. There is a double movement in the modern adoption of “spirituality,” a rejection of content and an embracing of form and quality.

The 1982 course uses spirituality to capture the process of truth leading to a transformation of subject, such that an act of knowledge is always accompanied by a change in the subject. This reading of ancient philosophy has an obvious critical force in a modern academic system that professionalizes knowledge for its own sake. Indeed, this is not lost on Foucault, even if he to some extent remains outside the Christian “conditions of the subject’s access to the truth.”⁵⁶ This might lead us to suggest that Foucault performed an effective rupture and re-deployment of “spirituality,” but the fact remains that the discourse of “spirit” provides something other languages cannot hold. At least, the Christian archive still has a hold on Foucault to some extent. This discrepancy can be seen in the numerous points of slippage between a specifically Christian and an applied philosophical notion of spirituality in the 1982

⁵³ Foucault, *The Hermeneutics of the Subject*, 16.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 19.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, 18.

course. These slippages return us to the problem of continuity and rupture and bring us again to the question of whether modernity can sustain its own discourse of transformation without recourse to “spirit” — Foucault’s enigmatic gesture.

Continuity or Rupture?

The fragility of Foucault’s idea of spirituality can be found in his discussion of the “structures de spiritualité,” which links knowledge to an “activity of knowing” or to a “transformation.”⁵⁷ According to Foucault this “structure” can be seen in certain nineteenth and twentieth century philosophical writings such writers as Schelling, Schopenhauer, Nietzsche, Husserl, and Heidegger, but also in Marxism and psychoanalysis—particularly in Lacan. Obviously, the discourse of Christian spirituality is under some strain in its Nietzschean and Marxist forms, not because the philosophical-spirituality model is absent, but because, in the former at least, spirit is re-read in terms of body; something Foucault recognised following Nietzsche.⁵⁸ Clearly, Foucault sought to express something outside of Christian spirituality in using the term, but he struggles frequently in the 1982 course to maintain the term outside the Christian etymology and it is perhaps for this reason that he felt his definition could not be held for “very long.”⁵⁹ It becomes awkward when “spirituality” refuses the modern rupture. We see the strain at a number of key points in the 1982 course: first, in his sketchy construction of Christian history and theology; second, in his eventual distinction between types of spirituality; and, third, in his movement back and forth between philosophy and spirituality, not least in trying to distinguish knowledge and spiritual knowledge (*savoir*). In order to illustrate my argument, I will take each of these theological points in turn, not least because they illustrate the two sides of my argument. They, first, demonstrate a refusal of rupture at the heart of Foucault’s modern discourse of transformation and, second, they clearly illustrate the reason behind Foucault’s enigmatic gesture in relation to spirituality. The reason “spirituality” would not work for “very long” is because it performs a practice of continuity and not “rupture”—it refuses the modern “transformation”.

i. Foucault’s Theological History

According to Foucault the break in unity between what we can call his ‘philosophical-spirituality’ and ‘modern philosophy’ occurs in scholastic theology, rather than in Descartes or later scientific thought. It is Aquinas, and the “exception” to the rule of early philosophical-spirituality in Aristotle, that brought about the shift. Foucault sees this conflict as emerging from Augustine in the 5th and continuing to the 17th century AD, a conflict between what we might call a *theology of transformation* and a *theology of intellect*. Foucault’s selective theological history takes no account of the complex evolution of theology prior to the 5th century and the different aspects of spiritual formation throughout Christian history. The desire to separate spirituality and theology as two different discourses is highly problematic in a tradition where Thomistic spirituality is arguably a transformation through scholastic meditation on God’s

⁵⁷ Foucault, *The Hermeneutics of the Subject*, 28; Foucault, *L’Herméneutique du sujet*, 30.

⁵⁸ See Carrette, *Foucault and Religion*, 115.

⁵⁹ Foucault, “The Ethic of the Care of the Self as a Practice of Freedom,” 14.

rational order of the world. The problem is similar to forms of intellectual mysticism in Pseudo-Dionysius and Barnard of Clairvaux; where rationality is part of the mystical event.⁶⁰ The problem increases when Hadot sought to find a deeper continuity in the tradition of “spiritual exercises” by arguing that Ignatius of Loyola’s *Spiritual Exercises* in 1522 had roots back to early Latin Christianity.⁶¹ There is no easy division between theology and spirituality, or spiritual exercises, in the same way that Foucault wants to build a distinction between ancient and modern philosophy, because the discourse of spirit is always rooted in a life of liturgical exercises and the practice of worship.⁶² The distinction between spirituality and theology is often a false binary in scholastic theology, just as Foucault believed it was at some level “meaningless to contrast spirituality and rationality” in Platonism.⁶³ Ironically, it is not until the first emergence of the term “spiritualité” in modern French theological history, in the writings of Madame de Guyon in the 17th century, that we find a deliberate distinction between theology and inner experience inside the genealogy of spirituality.⁶⁴ Foucault is aware of the importance of 16th and 17th century Christian spirituality and the “crisis” in Christianity at this point of history, but while he touches this period in the 1978 course, we do not get any further exposition or developed awareness in relation to the concept of “spirituality” in 1982.⁶⁵

ii. *Types of Spirituality*

While Foucault at one level wants to read spirituality within a philosophical context, he is unable to ignore the use of spirituality within a specifically Christian context.⁶⁶ We therefore find references to ancient spirituality, Stoic spirituality, Christian spirituality, and Gnostic spirituality as ways to organise the specific location of transformative exercises. This can also be seen in the more precise usage of *ascesis* as either Christian or philosophical.⁶⁷ This, however, does not solve the problem completely, because of the Gnostic problem Foucault had identified earlier in his lectures; where the “spiritual experience” is in “the act of knowledge itself.”⁶⁸ Foucault wants to draw out the difference between Christian spirituality in a monastic environment and Neo-Platonic Gnostic spirituality; but, as Foucault is aware, these divisions are difficult to sustain.⁶⁹ Nonetheless, he is still using the idea of spirituality as both a salvation through knowledge (“ascèse autour de la connaissance”) and salvation through spiritual monastic exercises.⁷⁰ The problem is that Foucault sees a “double game” in Platonism, where there is a “reabsorbing” of “spirituality in the movement of knowledge.”⁷¹ Foucault is unable

⁶⁰ See Grace Jantzen, *Power, Gender and Christian Mysticism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995).

⁶¹ Pierre Hadot, *Philosophy as a Way of Life*, 81-125.

⁶² See, for example, Scott Matthews, *Reason, Community and Religious Tradition: Anselm’s Argument and the Friars* (London: Ashgate, 2001).

⁶³ Foucault, *The Hermeneutics of the Subject*, 77.

⁶⁴ See Carrette & King, *Selling Spirituality*, 37-38.

⁶⁵ Foucault, *The Hermeneutics of the Subject*, 420, 423; Foucault, *Security, Territory, Population*, 225-237.

⁶⁶ Foucault, *The Hermeneutics of the Subject*, 299, 363, 503.

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, 332.

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, 16.

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, 421.

⁷⁰ Foucault, *The Hermeneutics of the Subject*, 421; Foucault *L’Herméneutique du sujet*, 402.

⁷¹ Foucault, *The Hermeneutics of the Subject*, 77-78.

to sort out the place of knowledge within Gnosticism and Platonism as they interface with Christianity. He therefore talks of a “decoupling” of self-knowledge from ideas of the self as a divine element within Christianity, by which he means monastic Christianity.⁷² The problem, as with the scholastic reading, is that within a discourse of Christian spirituality, “knowledge” (*savoir*) and “spiritual exercises” are never clearly separated, given the metaphysical reality of Christian knowledge (“*connaissance*” and “*savoir*”), which brings about a “transformation” through both intellect and practice in the history of mysticism. Foucault is caught in his own functionalist reading of a question that demands a different conceptual understanding. It also raises a question about the nature of knowledge and practice, which can also be seen in his reading of monasticism in his 1975 work *Discipline and Punish*.⁷³ The problems I raised about this text pertain to the 1982 course. It is not possible to read the functional relationships of spiritual practices outside the symbolic order, or system of belief, without some distortion. Dumézil, at least, kept these two orders in creative tension.⁷⁴

iii. Spiritual Knowledge and Pierre Hadot

The tensions in Foucault’s work between spirituality, Christian theology and Gnostic spirituality become even more transparent in Foucault’s terminology. In the 24th of February lecture, Foucault uses three key terms to express different forms of knowledge (*savoir*): “*savoir spirituel*” (spiritual knowledge), “*le savoir de spiritualité*” (the knowledge of spirituality) and “*la spiritualité du savoir*” (spirituality of knowledge). Developing themes within Seneca and Marcus Aurelius, Foucault underlined his model of “spiritual knowledge” (“*savoir spirituel*”), possessing all the qualities he outlined in his 6th of January exposition, but adding the element of the cosmos; a brief counterpoint, perhaps, to Hadot’s critique.⁷⁵ He then makes clear that “*le savoir de spiritualité*” (the knowledge of spirituality) will be effaced by “*le savoir de connaissance*” — a kind of knowledge of facts rather than lived knowledge. In line with Foucault’s use of literary figures, like Cervantes in *The Order of Things* to capture the epistemic shift to the Classical age, Foucault identified the literary uses of the figure of Faust between the 16th and 18th century to illustrate the shift between the two types of knowledge and the shifting attitudes to spiritual knowledge. The representation of Faust through Marlowe, Lessing, and Goethe reflects a changing attitude and undermining of spiritual knowledge. In Lessing, Foucault sees Faust change “spiritual knowledge” into faith and belief in the “progress of humanity.” At this moment Foucault easily changes the language from “*savoir spirituel*” (spiritual knowledge) into “*la spiritualité du savoir*” (the spirituality of knowledge). The slippage is perhaps minor, but in a text where terminology is being used and reconfigured for all sorts of different purposes, the confusions easily abound. Indeed, Graham Burchell, the English translator, felt it necessary to explain the problem of translating “*savoir spirituel*” (spiritual knowledge) and “*le savoir de spiritualité*” (knowledge of spirituality); due to the differences between *savoir* and *connaissance*, an issue which had previously been discussed specifically in

⁷² Foucault, *The Hermeneutics of the Subject*, 420.

⁷³ See Carrette, *Foucault and Religion*, 109-128.

⁷⁴ Georges Dumézil, *Archaic Roman Religion*, vols. 1 & 2 (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1996).

⁷⁵ Foucault, *The Hermeneutics of the Subject*, 308.

relation to the translation of *The Archaeology of Knowledge*.⁷⁶ However, it is the third term, “la spiritualité du savoir” (spirituality of knowledge), that is even more opaque. It is difficult to know Foucault’s subtle division between these ideas precisely, particularly in the context of his undeveloped examination of Gnosticism. The confusion also rests on the fact that “spirituality” already has a heavily qualified meaning. Foucault believes there is a “nostalgic” expression in the Enlightenment for what he calls “le savoir de spiritualité” (the knowledge of spirituality), but paradoxically this was precisely the time “spiritualité” emerges in modern 17th century French language.⁷⁷ We are again pressed to ask, with Foucault, whether this word “spirituality” is one we can use for very long without confusion.

In Edward McGushin’s wider study of the 1982 course, which—along with Gros’s work—is one of the first to develop a close reading of the text, he inevitably touches upon the nature and function of spirituality in Foucault.⁷⁸ He is basically concerned with three points. First, he correctly identifies “spirituality” as a concept taken from Hadot’s article “Exercises spirituals” (“Spiritual Exercises”), which Foucault mentions in his 1984 work *The Care of the Self*, but which he clearly knew in some form from around 1978.⁷⁹ Arnold Davidson had already established some of these links; not least by bringing together some of Hadot’s key essays on spiritual exercises. He argued that Foucault’s ethics were indebted to Hadot’s *Exercices spirituals et philosophie*.⁸⁰ Second, McGushin also notes that spirituality is not limited to Hadot’s idea of spirituality, but develops the notion of “truth as saving power.” Finally, McGushin’s work draws attention to the link in both Hadot and Foucault between Christian and Greek practices. McGushin’s philosophical exposition does not seek to address concerns about Christian theology, but the direction of his thinking leads us to this problematic line of transmission. The idea of truth and salvation, for example, directly returns us to the question of the metaphysical quality of Christian salvation as opposed to the quality of freedom or value in, for example, Seneca.⁸¹ This continues to raise the issue of how far Foucault displaces Christian theology. The link between Greek and Christian thinking is also the central twist in Foucault’s use of Christian spirituality and all these questions take us back to Hadot.

Pierre Hadot acknowledges his debt to the German scholar Paul Rabbow and his 1954 work *Seelenführung* (literally in the German ‘Leading the Soul’), which demonstrated the link between ancient philosophical exercises and the sixteenth-century work of Ignatius of Loyola on spiritual exercises. While Hadot recognises this link he still carries the same ambivalence

⁷⁶ Foucault, *The Hermeneutics of the Subject*, 309, trans. note; Foucault, *The Archaeology of Knowledge*, 15, note 2.

⁷⁷ Foucault, *The Hermeneutics of the Subject*, 311; Carrette & King, *Selling Spirituality*; Marie-Florine Bruneau, *Women Mystics Confront the Modern World* (Albany, NY: SUNY, 1998).

⁷⁸ See McGushin, *Foucault’s Askésis* and McGushin, “Foucault’s Cartesian Meditations.” I am grateful to Edward McGushin and James Bernauer for useful discussions about spirituality in the 1982 course.

⁷⁹ Hadot’s idea does not, however, seem to have influenced Foucault’s 1977-1978 course and there is little reason to assume that this was behind the notion of “political spirituality.”

⁸⁰ See Arnold I. Davidson, “Ethics as Ascetics: Foucault, the History of Ethics and Ancient Thought,” in Jan Goldstein (ed.), *Foucault and the Writing of History*, (Oxford, Basil Blackwell, 1994) and Arnold I. Davidson, “Introduction,” in Hadot, *Philosophy as a Way of Life*, 1-45.

⁸¹ Foucault, *The Hermeneutics of the Subject*, 308.

about the word “spiritual” that Foucault had about the concept of “spiritualité.” Hadot explains his own philosophical choice:

“Spiritual exercises.” The expression is a bit disconcerting for the contemporary reader. In the first place, it is no longer quite as fashionable these days to use the word “spiritual.” It is nevertheless necessary to use this term, I believe, because none of the other adjectives we could use—psychic, moral, ethical, intellectual, of thought, of the soul—covers all the aspects of the reality we want to describe... Above all the word “spiritual” reveals the true dimensions of these [philosophical] exercises. By means of them, the individual raises himself up to the life of the objective Spirit; that is to say, he re-places himself within the perspective of the Whole (“Become eternal by transcending yourself.”)⁸²

The ambivalence becomes more apparent when Hadot makes clear that “Christian spiritual exercises did indeed take on a new meaning by virtue of the specific character of Christian spirituality, inspired as it is by the death of Christ and the Trinitarian life of the divine Persons.”⁸³ However, both Foucault and Hadot fail to illustrate how this theological transformation of *spiritual* knowledge is different, because, along with Rabbow, they want to show that the “assimilation between Christianity and philosophy *cannot be over-emphasized.*”⁸⁴ The very desire for continuity overrides the discontinuity in terms of the metaphysical truth of Christ. The problem, however, is not specifically a problem related to the science of religion at the *École Pratique*, it is a historical problem of the relation between Christianity and philosophy in the ancient world; not least in Alexandria where Christianity established its own neo-Platonic base. It is, therefore, the lines of continuity that allow Hadot and Foucault to reverse the conceptual traffic and apply the later Christian discourses of spirituality to philosophy in the desire to establish links with “transformative” knowledge. It is this continuity that refuses the rupture of modernity.

The repeated concern in this essay has been about suppression of the distinctive theological truths in Christianity and how liturgical practices and metaphysical belief systems transform knowledge. It raises the question of how a functionalist analysis of religious discourse can capture the Christian metaphysical politic of transformation satisfactorily, which, if we want to follow Foucault, requires a “spirituality” of “Spirituality” (the transformative knowledge of Christian spirituality). This does not necessarily require acceptance of the belief system (which it is not my aim to enforce), but it does require some acknowledgement that practice in Christianity cannot be separated from the discourse of faith and belief. To illustrate this I want to follow briefly Hadot’s own sources within the Christian tradition that allow him to establish the continuity argument; and allow me to underline the problem of rupture. Within the limits of this essay I will just mention one key source, that of Clement of Alexandria.

Hadot refers to Clement of Alexandria on a number of occasions to show the bridge between ancient philosophy and Christianity in the tradition of Philo of Alexandria, but what is

⁸² Hadot, *Philosophy as a Way of Life*, 81-82.

⁸³ *Ibid.*, 127.

⁸⁴ *Ibid.*, 129, my italics.

never explored are the limits of Christian philosophy in such an assimilation. One of Hadot's central sources in both his early work and in his later popular reiterations of the subject is Clement's *Stromateis* or *Miscellanies*.⁸⁵ The sense of Christianity as the "revealed philosophy" is clearly marked out, but Hadot marginalises other aspects in Clement's discourse, even as his footnotes hold some faint—but important—qualification in justice to the text.⁸⁶ In Book 1 of the *Stromateis* Clement makes it clear that philosophy is the "preliminary education" or "exercise."

So, before the Lord's coming, philosophy was an essential guide to righteousness for the Greeks. At the present time, it is a useful guide towards reverence of God... So philosophy is a preparatory process; it opens the road for the person whom Christ brings to his final goal.⁸⁷

The discourse of spirit is transformed in a discourse about Christ, as the Biblical writings of Saint Paul illustrate.⁸⁸ This reconfiguration of true knowledge requires a life of prayer and contemplation of God as exemplified in the monastic tradition. It is also worth noting, as Andrew Louth indicates, that the work of Evagrius, who followed the Alexandrian school through Origen, was condemned by the later Church for establishing a mystical *philosophy* rather than a mystical *theology*.⁸⁹ It was, of course, Cassian—the subject of Foucault's own study of monasticism—who brought Evagrius to the Western monastic tradition, but notably without the heretical dimensions. While it was the practical elements that survived in Cassian, Foucault's work on monasticism, both in his 1975 study and in the later fragments on Cassian and monasticism, suffer by isolating practices of confession (techniques of the self) rather than exploring the dynamic of belief and the practices of prayer and contemplation.⁹⁰ In contrast to the 1982 lectures, we may note that the 1977-1978 lecture course explores the "l'économie des âmes" ("the economy of souls") in a richer theological context of the Eucharist, mysticism and asceticism and maintains a distinction between the spiritual and temporal order.⁹¹ Foucault's spiritual *philosophy* is interwoven with his spiritual *theology* and such an interweaving is a refusal of the modern "rupture."

Finally, we may note that there is an even more problematic element in Foucault's attempt to valorise ancient "transformative knowledge" (*epimeleia*) over modern philosophical knowledge (*gnōthi seautou*) through the discourse of spirituality, which is the paradox of his engage-

⁸⁵ Ibid., 127; Pierre Hadot, *What is Ancient Philosophy?* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press/Harvard University Press, 2002), 239.

⁸⁶ Hadot, *What is Ancient Philosophy?*, 315.

⁸⁷ Clement of Alexandria, *Stromateis*, Books 1-3, translated by John Ferguson (Washington, DC: Catholic University of American Press, 1991), 42.

⁸⁸ See, for example, Frederick Fyvie Bruce, *Paul: Apostle of the Free Spirit* (Exeter: Paternoster Press, 1977), 203ff.

⁸⁹ Andrew Louth, *The Origins of the Christian Mystical Tradition* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1981), 113.

⁹⁰ See Michel Foucault, "The Battle for Chastity," (1982) in Carrette (ed.), *Religion and Culture*, 188-197.

⁹¹ Foucault, *Sécurité, Territoire, Population*, 196, 207-219, 235; Foucault, *Security, Territory, Population*, 192, 204-216, 230.

ment with Christian truth as transformative knowledge. Foucault is trapped inside the tension of his modern analysis of Christian spirituality, even as he appeals to religious alternatives to Western governmentality and shows concern for the loss of political spirituality in the West. While Foucault recognised that Christianity held many paradoxes, his 1982 approach opened another: Christianity without transformation, without “spirituality.” However, it might be that Foucault was indeed transformed by Christian spirituality in his very ambivalence. What we see in the 1982 lectures, for all the attempts to read spirituality outside the Christian context, is the constant faltering and inevitable echo of the Christian tradition. It would appear that both Hadot and Foucault are themselves transformed by their French Catholic inheritance in their qualified deployment of the ideas of “spiritual” and “spirituality,” even in the French corridors of secular philosophy and the supposed “neutral” science of religion. Foucault, at least, was left with some curious genealogical operations. The processes of modernity did not completely rupture the discourse of spirit.

Conclusion: Spirituality and French Laughter

[W]e have forgotten since the Renaissance and the great crisis of Christianity, a *political spirituality*. I can already hear the French laughing, but I know that they are wrong.⁹²

The laughter of the French is the laugh of the modern rupture. It is the desire to remove the discourse of Christian spirituality from the discourse of transformation in modernity. It was for this reason that Foucault recognised that “spirituality” was unsustainable in his later work, but the persistence of “spirituality” becomes the mark of questioning the transformations of modern knowledge. It illustrates how “spirituality” challenges modern knowledge not only in its transformative potential, but also in its claim to historical rupture. Foucault is always uncomfortable about using the term; even in the context of “political spirituality” he anticipates the laughter of French society. Nonetheless, his ability to use “spiritual”, in quotation marks, in the 1960s, “political spirituality” in the 1970s and “spirituality” as a practice of freedom in the 1980s, reflects the specific intervention and powerful work that this concept carries out inside his arguments. What Foucault demonstrates is how spirituality acts in the spaces of modern liminality. It is a borderline concept, speaking both inside and outside of its many fields of application, crossing the domains of acceptability, and transgressing the assumptions of modern rupture.

In Clare O’Farrell’s early identification of the themes of spirituality in Foucault’s work, she underlined his understanding of the loss of the “spiritual dimension” in Western society in the Iranian reports and linked this to his early work on madness and rationality.⁹³ O’Farrell’s link, between the limit and Otherness in Foucault and spirituality, illustrates that the concept of spirituality is always marking out the question of Truth and Reason in society. Developing O’Farrell’s point, we can suggest that spirituality holds the “power of contestation” in mad-

⁹² Michel Foucault, “What are the Iranians Dreaming About?,” in Afary and Anderson, *Foucault and the Iranian Revolution*, 209.

⁹³ Clare O’Farrell, *Foucault: Historian or Philosopher?* (London: Macmillan, 1989), 73.

ness, in political regimes, and in the politics of transformative knowledge.⁹⁴ It is a critical category because it moves between the truth and falsity of modernity and the truth and falsity of ancient metaphysical systems of knowledge. Spirituality is always transforming the discourses of modernity politically, because modernity suppresses its pre-modern Other inside the truth of history. The Other of modernity can therefore return to mark out the truth/falsity of political government, because it opens up the disturbing space of alterity in secular, democratic judgements. Its power is to sanction or condemn the political regime according to the authority of something both inside and outside of history.

Foucault is a modern exponent of spirituality as a critical category, something that is distinct from the contemporary marketing ideas of spirituality and modern religious institutional discourse, but it remains dependent on a pre-modern theological history. Spirituality refuses the rupture of modernity, even in transforming the discourse of spirit, because it develops a continuity of signification. There is, as Foucault makes clear in his use of spirituality, always too much at stake to base our truth on what we already know. The discourse of spirituality at least opens up the politics of continual transformation by holding up what we can be and what is not yet seen. It might be that we can never leave the discourse of spirit, even when all the old gods have died. It might not be the *right* word for modernity, but spirituality, like God for Foucault, is involved in a “contest with more than one round.”⁹⁵ In the end, alongside genealogy, power and discourse, Foucault’s ideas on “spirituality” leave us with a vital resource for critical thinking in the 21st century. It reveals something of the “myth of our modernity” and reveals the fragility of “rupture” inside our discourses of “transformation.”

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⁹⁴ Michel Foucault, *Histoire de folie à l'âge classique* (Paris, Gallimard, 1972); O'Farrell, *Foucault: Historian or Philosopher?*, 73.

⁹⁵ Foucault, *The Order of Things*, 325.