

ARTICLE

Religion in the Web of Immanence: Foucault and Thinking Otherwise after the Death of God

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ABSTRACT: This article rethinks Michel Foucault's relation to religion by situating his engagement with the 'death of God' in relation to his ongoing efforts to frame critical discourse in consistently immanent terms. It argues that a certain, indirect 'theological' horizon is the paradoxical and problematic limit, for Foucault, of the possibility of a thoroughgoing immanent discourse in his earlier work, due to the paradoxes of the death of long-duration of God (and 'man'). The relation of his work to religion thus emerges less as a productive question, for Foucault, than as a problem to be resolved if his critical project is to be viable. The article argues that his later work is informed by a significant re-framing of his relation to religion, signalled in comments he makes at the end of his 1978 lecture, "What is Critique?" and performed in his engagements with Christian mysticism, the 'political spirituality' of the Iranian revolution and early Christian practices of the self. Foucault is shown to perform a complex openness to religion as 'other,' which negotiates the 'religious problem' haunting his early work, even as it must repeatedly risk undermining his project. It is concluded that the relation to religion in Foucault's work, less reflects resonance with aspects of a religious worldview, than it stages and clarifies the challenge of thinking otherwise immanently after the death of God.

Keywords: Religion, death of God, immanent discourse, thinking otherwise, later Foucault.

In this article, I seek to rethink Michel Foucault's relation to religion by situating his engagement with the 'death of God' in relation to his ongoing efforts to frame critical discourse in consistently immanent terms. It has been well-documented that the repeated struggle to resolve tensions in his formulation of an immanent notion of critical discourse, which would avoid appeal both to notions of a transcendent reality and to any transcendentalism, is a significant factor in the evolution of Foucault's thought at a series of points in his career, at least beginning from Derrida's (in)famous critique of *Histoire de la folie*.¹ However, to date, this dy-

¹ See, for example, Beatrice Han, *Foucault's Critical Project: Between the Transcendental and the Historical* (Stanford, California: Stanford University Press, 2002). See Jacques Derrida, "Cogito and the History of Madness," in *Writing and Difference*, translated by Alan Bass (London and New York: Routledge, 2006), 36-76.

namic struggle has not been brought to bear upon analysis of his engagement with religion, although the 'death of God' leads directly to questions about the limits and possibilities of thinking immanence and transcendence (beyond an ontotheological metaphysics). Bringing these two strands of Foucault's work into dialogue suggests that his engagements with religion are, at least in part, paradoxically connected with the problem of constructing a purely immanent discourse. Indeed, this article argues that a certain, indirect but apparently unavoidable, openness to religion is precisely a paradoxical and problematic condition, for Foucault, of a consistently immanent discourse, capable of "thinking otherwise" (*penser autrement*)² after 'the death of God.' I will argue that Foucault's key problem is how to negotiate this paradox so as to render his thought consistently immanent and critically effective. Religion, it will be argued, repeatedly emerges as a problem in Foucault's work, whose negotiation 'stages' and 'dramatises' the challenge of realising a critically-effectively, immanent discourse, and foregrounds its dynamics, risks, and limits.

Departing from recent efforts to establish how Foucault's thought supports or at least productively intersects with religious and theological thought,³ this reading draws inspiration from the work of fellow 'poststructuralist' Jacques Derrida to uncover a more complex, problematised Foucauldian relation to religion, building upon parallels between their projects on the question of religion.⁴ For his part, Derrida proposes that religion repeatedly 'returns' as a question for contemporary philosophical discourse, in significant part, because it is undecidable whether the constitution of modern reason in opposition to religion led to rationalistic jettisoning of properly reasonable dimensions of thought as religious (perhaps among them, "philosophical faith," Derrida argues).⁵ However, if the "return of religion" may constitute the return of reason to itself, we cannot, living on this side of the reason-religion disjunction, determine that this is the case (for the reason, which would decide so, by definition, excludes religion, or would have to rupture its own bounds to include it). Rather, it is undecidable whether 'religion,' as it returns is, in fact, a name for that which exceeds reason as its truncated 'other.' Or (to deploy Gianni Vattimo's terms) it may be a name for a 'singular' or 'positive'

² This remains a key problem, perhaps the key problem, for Foucault, even to the end of his life. See Michel Foucault, *The Use of Pleasure: The History of Sexuality: Volume 2* (London and New York: Penguin, 1992), 8ff.

³ It is beyond the scope of this article to examine this growing body of work. See my earlier, John McSweeney, "State of the Disciplines: Foucault and Theology," *Foucault Studies* 2 (May 2005), 117-44. There I argue that a tension in conceptualisation of Foucault's relation to theology lies in the tendency to depend subtly on modernist paradigms of the theology-philosophy relation which tend to flatten out the relation to his work.

⁴ The most sustained exploration of parallels between Derrida and Foucault on religion is found in Johannes Hoff, *Spiritualität und Sprachverlust: Theologie nach Foucault und Derrida* (Paderborn: Schöningh, 1999). See also Arthur Bradley, *Negative Theology and Modern French Philosophy* (London and New York: Routledge, 2004). While Bradley, in particular, has important criticisms to make of Foucault's "thought of the outside," both these works are written primarily from a Derridean perspective, with rather less attention to Foucault's relation to theology in its own right. Even then, they focus primarily on the question of the relation of negative theology to contemporary critical thought, rather than upon the broader question of 'religion.'

⁵ For what follows, see Jacques Derrida, "Faith and Knowledge: The Two Sources of "Religion" at the Limits of Reason Alone," in Jacques Derrida and Gianni Vattimo (eds.), *Religion* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1998), 1-78.

phenomenon (neither simply transcendent nor historical) upon which, paradoxically, universal reason depends.⁶ Or again, it may be a name for discourse, practices and apparatuses related to and dependent upon a notion of a transcendent reality. A complex relation arises, in which contemporary critical thinkers are neither “priests” nor “enemies of religion,” but must interrogate religion’s returns in light of their constitutive commitment to “public-ness” and “republican democracy as a universalizable model.”⁷ At the same time, contemporary critical thought is unable to exclude the possibility—devastating (arguably) for the modern critical project as such—that the contemporary return of religion signals religion’s necessity (either as singular phenomenon or as relating to a transcendent realm), to the exercise of reason.⁸

I will argue that, in a not dissimilar vein, religion repeatedly returns in Foucault’s work as a problem for critical thought. This is, in part, because the death of God poses a similar problem for reason in relation to the question of immanence and transcendence. Writing after the death of God, Foucault must grapple, no less than Derrida, with ‘undecidable’ alternatives. First, it may be that crucial possibilities of articulating transcendence(-within-immanence) may be bound up with religion, such that either engagement with religion—as its excess or ‘other’ excluded by modern thought—enables reason to ‘return to itself.’ Or, second, it may be that transcendence is finally thinkable as such only within the horizon of the singular contribution of religion to thought, or religious claims concerning the transcendent.

To develop the distinctive Foucauldian form of such a relation to religion, this article will consider Foucault’s evolving approach to the death of God through the lens of three ‘moments’ of his work in the 1960s: his 1963 *hommage* to Georges Bataille, the final pages of *Les mots et les choses* (1966), and a brief comment on the death of God in the 1969, “What is an author?”⁹ It will then turn to a decisive (if unadvertised) transformation in Foucault’s conception of his relation to religion (and the limit), in the late 1970s, beyond the terms that had appeared

⁶ Gianni Vattimo has strongly articulated notion of the singularity of religion and the complex dependence of universal reason upon its singularity, using a notion of “positivity.” Religion as a “positive” phenomenon is neither the “finitude beyond which religious experience would have us ‘leap,’ so to speak (into God or transcendence)” nor governed by a “historical determinism.” Focussing on the incarnation, Vattimo argues that the event-like quality of religion is crucial to the very possibility of a philosophical thought which is not a simple description of its “times.” See Gianni Vattimo, “The Trace of the Trace,” in Jacques Derrida and Gianni Vattimo (eds.), *Religion* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1998), 79-94, especially 85, 94.

⁷ Derrida, “Faith and Reason,” 7-8.

⁸ While Derrida is not anti-religious, and embraces the need for the retrieval of philosophical faith in dialogue with religion and its correlate, a certain messianicity, he nonetheless is insistent on the difference between messianisms and messianicity, and the ultimate inadequacy of the former to the latter. See, for example, one of his final interviews, in which his distance from religions is clear: Jacques Derrida, “The Justice to Come” (interview with Lieven De Cauter, 2004), accessed online at http://archive.indymedia.be/uploads/derrida_en.pdf on 21/05/2012. Equally, arguments such as Vattimo’s about the dependence of reason upon the “positivity” or singularity or religion, raises significant problems for the universality of a critical discourse. Specifically, Vattimo argues that the incarnation is the ‘event’ necessary to reveal the very possibility of a critical thought.

⁹ Michel Foucault, “A Preface to Transgression,” in *Essential Works of Michel Foucault 1954-1984, Volume 2: Aesthetics*, edited by James D. Faubian (London and New York: Penguin, 2000), 69-87; Michel Foucault, *The Order of Things: An Archaeology of the Human Sciences*: (London and New York: Routledge Classics, 1989); Michel Foucault, “What is an Author?,” in *Essential Works, Volume 2*, 205-22, especially 209.

to be imposed by the death of God. Finally, it will consider three instances of this transformed relation in Foucault's later work.

Transgression and the Death of God

The question of the death of God is explicitly linked to that of immanence in "A Preface to Transgression," Foucault's 1963 *hommage* to Georges Bataille. Transgression is transgression against an absent God (distinction is not made between religious and metaphysical senses of the term, both being evoked). Hence, transgression does not involve a simple "theological anger," to borrow Jeremy Carrette's succinct phrase.¹⁰ Instead, even as transgression opens onto "the night where God is absent, and where all of our actions are addressed to this absence in profanation" such profanation "at once identifies it, dissipates it, exhausts itself in it, and restores it to the empty purity of its transgression."¹¹ That is, transgression characteristically begins from an act, which affirms God's absence by seeking to provoke his promised anger (or activate the limits of being), against profanation. However, the movement of transgression is ultimately toward a recognition that God has never existed (both the Christian God and metaphysical ideals of being). As such, it leads to the immanent affirmation of the limited, divided being of human beings as that which exists and which is deserving of affirmation. As Foucault puts it: "Transgression contains nothing negative." It is at a decisive remove from Hegelian negation and its recuperations (or indeed, from a negative theology which would negate in order to affirm a more profound reality).¹² Instead, it exhausts itself in affirming the limit as finite, by effacing it as boundary with a realm of otherness. The limit is affirmed as internal to finite being rather than a limit with that which lies beyond finite being: transgression, "affirms limited being... Perhaps it is simply an affirmation of division... [of] the existence of difference."¹³

This formulation suggests that transgression might serve as a model of an immanent act of freedom, that is, as an act whose affirmations (of "finite" difference) involve no re-inscription of a transcendent or transcendental order. Yet, the affirmation involved remains impossibly tied—as Foucault acknowledges¹⁴—to the transgressive experience of divine absence. Of course, the death of God is an "event"—a specific historical shift, provoked by a myriad of factors—in the Western commitment to a transcendentally-ordered world, what Foucault terms a world shaped by the "limit of the Limitless." However, it is, Foucault argues, no mere past event, but "continues indefinitely tracing its great skeletal outline."¹⁵ Undoubtedly, this is, in part, due to the density of the experience of the "limit of the Limitless" and the long reign of the latter, culturally and intellectually—the death of God could not have been an event of short duration. But more profoundly, the reason lies in the very nature of the death

¹⁰ Jeremy Carrette, *Foucault and Religion: Spiritual Corporality and Political Spirituality* (London and New York: Routledge 2000), 74.

¹¹ Foucault, "A Preface to Transgression," 70.

¹² *Ibid.*, 74.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 74.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 71: "Bataille was perfectly conscious of the possibilities of thought that could be released by this death, and of the impossibilities to which it could entangle thought."

¹⁵ Foucault, "A Preface to Transgression," 71

of this order, or "ordo" (as Heidegger puts it),¹⁶ as revealed by the dynamics of transgression and specifically its mode of affirming finite difference.

Transgression cannot open onto an 'other' realm of being without reinscribing a version of the 'ordo' it would deny; and it must therefore exhaust itself in affirming the limit. As such, its drama must be perpetually repeated: it cannot decisively move beyond the Christian-metaphysical 'ordo,' but must repeatedly affirm finite difference in uncovering once more, in some new existentially-significant fashion, the non-existence of God. Transgression inscribes the drama of the death of God as a new "structure" of experience.¹⁷ Moreover, it is not only that transgression must as it were, begin again with each of its instances. In addition, as Foucault's 'lightening-in-the-night' metaphor of the relation of transgression and the limit makes clear, this starting point profoundly conditions what may be affirmed of the finite limits of human existence. If transgression is ultimately secondary to the limit which it affirms (the flash of lightening loses itself in that to which it gives clarity) and if it "owes the dark the stark clarity of its manifestation, its harrowing and poised singularity" (i.e. if transgression is only so forceful and significant an act because it touches upon some obscured dimension of human existence), it nonetheless "gives a dense and black intensity to the night it denies."¹⁸ That is to say, the specific light cast upon it by the concern to transgress God largely circumscribes what is revealed and affirmed of the finite limit. For instance, sexual transgression certainly reveals the finite limit constituted in human experience by sexuality, but its focus is upon taboo, excess, anxiety and so on, because this limit is revealed in the transgression of the strictures both of religious sexual morality and religious ideals concerning what sexuality signifies. When Carrette regrets that Foucault never moves, in his thought about sexual transgression, beyond models of "isolation, distrust, and anxiety,"¹⁹ he thus arguably encounters, not a failure of will, on Foucault's part, to engage with a more holistic conception of sexuality, but precisely the limit of transgression as precisely transgression of the absent God.²⁰

This analysis also offers a fresh perspective on Carrette's claim that Foucault's work in this period involves a "religious question."²¹ In the first instance, the relation between transgression and limit underscores how Foucault could, as Carrette demonstrates, utilise transgression of religious conceptions of the body and sexuality to enrich, contest, and destabilise their modern post-religious counterparts. For, if the specificity of transgression restricts the ways in which finite human limits are experienced, it also casts a particular light upon them.

¹⁶ Martin Heidegger, "Nietzsche's Word: 'God is Dead,'" in Martin Heidegger, *Off the Beaten Track*, edited and translated by Julian Young and Kenneth Haynes (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 164-5.

¹⁷ Foucault, "A Preface to Transgression," 70: "the speech given to sexuality is contemporaneous in both time and structure, with that through which we announced to ourselves that God is dead."

¹⁸ Foucault, "A Preface to Transgression," 69-70. See also, 73: "The limit and transgression depend on each other for whatever density of being they possess: a limit could not exist if it were absolutely uncrossable and, reciprocally, transgression would be pointless if merely crossed a limit composed of illusions and shadows."

¹⁹ Carrette, *Foucault and Religion*, 83.

²⁰ Of course, in principle, transgression (as a general term) need not be transgression of the absent God, with its peculiar dynamics. However, the question and ultimately the problem for Foucault concerns how to conceive of transgression in different terms, against the density of the experience of the death of God and the form it prescribes for transgression.

²¹ Carrette, *Foucault and Religion*, 3.

And religious experience, as Derrida has been seen to assert, may well embody dimensions of human experience rejected as religious by the Enlightenment. If the religious death of God has largely occurred in modern thought, Foucault himself later makes clear, in *The Order of Things*, that philosophy from Kant, through Hegel and Marx, remains bound to that death by the figure of man. As such, religious transgression has the capacity to disrupt a thought, which claims to have dispensed with the religious God, but remains circumscribed by the subtle 'ordo' constituted around the figure of 'man.' However, this essentially philosophical act of destabilisation and complication,²² is already haunted by a further implicit question: if transgression is bound to repeat the drama of the death of God—experienced, by Foucault and Bataille, as the singular horizon and "structure" of contemporary thought—and if transgression of the absent God delimits what may be affirmed of finite being, is it possible to think immanence only within an indirect (and, strictly, non-existent) 'theological' horizon?²³ (Even if transgression should have concluded that God never existed, what may be affirmed of immanence is circumscribed by that conception of God, as the object of transgression.) And if immanence is thinkable only in a restricted manner, within such a singularly delimited horizon, is the possibility of a thoroughgoing immanent discourse fatally undermined?

How to assess the extent to which such a theological horizon poses a 'religious question' for Foucault and for immanent discourse? First, it should be noted that any answer to this question must recognise that the notion of 'God,' within the horizon of the death of God, as Derrida indicates in somewhat different terms, itself involves an undecidable religious question: that is, in what sense (to put it naively) does God signify the God of Christianity or Being, and its ideals, within metaphysics? However, this complicating question is not of key significance in relation to Foucault. For, however the question is answered, the theological horizon of transgressive affirmation of finite difference does not appear to imply any kind of 'negative theology,' because, in transgression, finite human being is affirmed in its own right, not just as a sublation of the theological, however it might be defined.²⁴ The theological horizon does not

²² See Jeremy Carrette, "Prologue to a Confession of the Flesh," in Michel Foucault, *Religion and Culture*, edited by Jeremy R. Carrette (New York and London: Routledge, 1999), 20-23. Carrette clarifies that the 'post-religious' question of Foucault's thought, as it engages with Bataille, is not a religious question in the traditional sense. See also Michael Mahon, *Foucault's Nietzschean Genealogy: Truth, Power and the Subject*. SUNY Series in Contemporary Continental Philosophy (New York: State University Press of New York, 1992), 63-65. Mahon argues that Foucault's Bataille is one who restores to discourse the possibility of the "sacred." However, the 'sacred' refers primarily to that which resists assimilation to bourgeois and everyday reality, that which is revealed in moments of shock when everyday categories temporarily crumble. It is unclear whether the term bears any religious connotation.

²³ Although the death of God is both metaphysical and religious, the question remains as to whether one or other is primary. Is the death of God primarily metaphysical and religion thereby merely stripped of an inessential metaphysical form? Or is religion (or a specific religion) rooted in a singular event, or does it constitute a singularity, that in Vattimo's terms is not simply historical but an irruptive *event* that makes key dimensions of philosophical thought (of the event, of a transcendence of and within history) possible. Insofar as religious transgression proves at least an important dimension of transgression, then, credence is given to the latter notion of a religious singularity, which conditions all thought.

²⁴ Foucault's notion of negative theology is useful here. See Foucault, "The Thought of the Outside," *Essential Works, Volume 2*, 150: although negative theology "involves going 'outside of oneself,' this is done ulti-

constitutively condition the affirmation as such: transgressive affirmation is not directly conditioned by whether God is the Christian God or refers to the pinnacle of Being. Rather, what can be affirmed is *circumscribed* by the *singularity* or *positivity* of God—the singular set of ideas, events, etc. associated with God, which cannot be translated into universal terms—(again) however God is defined.²⁵ It is the circumscription of the possible scope of affirmation that raises the question of whether an immanent transgressive discourse can bear on all aspects of human existence, or is limited to certain specific elements, defined by the singularity of God. As a consequence, the undecidability of the term ‘God’ is largely irrelevant for Foucault.

Readers of Foucault, who accept a certain persisting vitality of ‘religion beyond religion’ (with all of the undecidability that conditions that notion) might find, in Foucault’s grappling with this strangely indirect ‘theological’ horizon, the delineation of a post-*religious* space, which contaminates and destabilises traditional religious spaces. However, the preceding analysis suggests that this ‘religious question’—insofar as it comes into focus as a question—becomes, for Foucault’s thought, an acute difficulty that appears to impose a limit upon the possibility of entering upon an unfettered immanent discourse, and thus threatens to undermine it. Put differently, from the perspective of the question of religion, this ‘religious *problem*’ can potentially be thought of as a productive problem which opens new spaces of religious thinking, while from Foucault’s perspective it is, or rather becomes, in the repetition of transgression, a problem to be resolved, if his critical project is to endure. Thus, in “A Preface to Transgression,” the preceding questions amount only to a tension, but by *The Order of Things* (1966), it has become a problem which that work seeks to solve in its final pages.

Beyond Transgression? The Death of God and Man

Foucault frames his history of the emergence and death of man, and the return of language, in *The Order of Things*, in terms of the Nietzschean notion of the death of God and the last man, arguing that:

the last man is at the same time older and younger than the death of God; since he has killed God, it is he himself who must answer for his own finitude; but since it is the death of God that he speaks, thinks, and exists, his murder is itself doomed to die.²⁶

Evidently, Foucault is here concerned primarily with Nietzsche’s last man, his own modern subject. However, his analysis applies no less cogently to the transgressive subject of “A Preface to Transgression.” With clear echoes of the preceding analysis, the text suggests that the

mately in order to find oneself, to wrap and gather oneself in the dazzling interiority of a thought that is rightfully Being and Speech, in other words, Discourse, even if it is the silence beyond all language and the nothingness beyond all being.”

²⁵ As Vattimo, highlights a singular dimension of Christianity is the Incarnation. Following Foucault, one might say that ‘confession of the flesh’ is another. Metaphysics and the God of metaphysics would appear to be universalizable, but the dependence upon certain ideals of being or a certain transcendent(al) speculation concerning the hierarchy of being arguably renders them highly ‘singular’—a positive construct, which fundamentally shapes thought, but whose appeals to transcendent being or the transcendentals of being breach the limits of immanence.

²⁶ Foucault, *The Order of Things*, 420.

death of God, indeed, the murder of God, involves the human affirmation of human finitude on its own terms. Moreover, no less than in the case of transgression, what the last man “speaks, thinks and exists” in affirming his finitude, is the “death of God,” such that the affirmation of finitude is limited and indirect. The text also highlights—if in slightly different terms—how, under repetition, the act of killing God ultimately undermines its own efficacy. At best, then, transgression is implicitly contextualised as having constituted a mode of resistance to the dominant modern paradigm of subjective experience, within an era that is now passing. Transgression, one might say, with its language of “sovereignty” and “inner experience” belongs to the era of man.²⁷

That Foucault intends that the potential ‘religious problem’ posed by transgression should end with this contextualisation, is suggested by his explicit commitment to the Nietzschean notion that after the death of God the space remains “empty”: ‘man’ is not the sublation of the dead God (by contrast with Hegel’s notion that dialectically developing reason sublates God and Feuerbach’s notion that man develops with the dismissal of the illusion of God).²⁸ And indeed, this point follows from the previous quotation: affirmation of human finitude in the death of God is external to that death as such, and if man is doomed to disappear, it is not because man sublates God and the death of the latter implies the death of the former, but that the last man is fundamentally circumscribed by his inability to think immanence beyond the indirect self-affirmation constituted by murdering God—an affirmation which loses its force as the idea of God’s death takes hold, so that the death of God eventually implies the death of man.²⁹ Nevertheless, if Foucault would consign transgression and the ‘religious problem’ it poses to the passing era of man, the impossibility of transgression and this ‘religious problem’ are not so easily overcome.

One of the striking features of Foucault’s announcement of the death of man in *The Order of Things* is that he ultimately does not pronounce his death as such, only its imminent possibility:

man is an invention of recent date. And one perhaps nearing its end. If those arrangements were to disappear [that gave rise to man]... then one certainly wagers that man would be erased, like a face drawn in the sand at the edge of the sea.³⁰

Again, “we believe that something new is about to begin, something we glimpse only as a thin line low on the horizon.”³¹ What is the significance of this caution before announcing the

²⁷ Foucault, “A Preface to Transgression,” 71.

²⁸ Foucault, “Philosophy and the Death of God,” in Foucault, *Religion and Culture*, 85.

²⁹ The English translation of *Les mots et les choses* appears to lend support to the argument that Foucault’s pronouncement of the death of the subject constitutes a kind of negative theology, when it states that “the death of God and the last man are engaged in a contest with more round” (*la mort de Dieu et le dernier homme ont partie liée*). The phrase is, however, better translated as “the death of God and the last man go hand in glove.” This alternative translation points more restrictedly to the idea that the death of man follows upon the death of God, precisely for the reasons just discussed. Foucault, *The Order of Things*, 420; Michel Foucault, *Les mots et les choses: Une archéologie des sciences humaines* (Paris: Gallimard, 2002), 396.

³⁰ Foucault, *The Order of Things*, 422.

³¹ *Ibid.*, 419.

death of man? While Foucault might be supposed merely to be exploiting the force of dramatic announcement, the deeper answer lies once more with the problem of the long shadow of the death of God and how to think immanently beyond and independently of it. Foucault's hesitation is paralleled by a specific gloss that he offers on his extension of the Nietzschean death of God to man: his anticipation of the likely death of man in the phrase: "new gods, the same gods are swelling the future ocean."³² For although it recalls Heidegger's critique, that Nietzsche's *Übermensch* remains entangled in the nihilism of Western metaphysics, it equally constitutes a critique of Heidegger's alternative notion that today we are in a "needy time" where being has withdrawn and hope lies in its return (the return of the gods).³³ Already, in 1966, Foucault elsewhere attempts to deploy the notion of the *Übermensch*, while disburdening himself of its Nietzschean content, by suggesting the overman "will be whoever can overcome the absence of God and the absence of man in the same gesture of overtaking."³⁴ Later, he will draw a distinction between a Nietzschean will to knowledge, which is to be embraced (and "diagnoses the state of thought... studying the space in which thought unfolds, as well as the conditions of that thought, and the mode of its constitution")³⁵ and a Nietzschean will to power to be avoided.³⁶ As such, Foucault clearly accepts Heidegger's view that Nietzsche's 'overman' remains entangled with the last man and the death of God, and does not support pursuit of an immanent philosophical discourse. At the same time, Foucault's reference to "new gods, the same gods" robs Heidegger's thought of its notion of a decisive, compelling return of being to come, suggesting that the new gods can only largely be the same gods, albeit offering some differing configuration and possibilities of being. Moreover, the phrase suggests that if the gods are present to both the present and the future, they are not only the locus of a return of being, but form part of the order of things. That is to say, for Foucault, there can only be mundane, but real possibilities of historical change, with their continuities, discontinuities, and ambiguities—however dramatic such shifts (of *episteme*) may appear to be.³⁷

³² Ibid., 420,

³³ See Martin Heidegger, "Hölderlin and the Essence of Poetry," in *Existence and Being* (South Bend, Indiana: Regnery/Gateway, 1979), 289; Martin Heidegger, "Remembrance of the Poet," in *Existence and Being*, 244-259, 264-265. The notion of the "future Ocean" recalls Nietzsche's "madman," who wonders how we have been able to kill God, "But how did we do this? How were we able to drink up the sea?" (Nietzsche, *The Gay Science*, 120 (section 125)). Through this phrase, Foucault subtly suggests that he does not embrace Heidegger's wider philosophical perspective, but his critique of Nietzsche as a modification of the latter's viewpoint.

³⁴ Foucault, "Philosophy and the Death of God," 86.

³⁵ Ibid. This quote is in fact from 1966, but here Foucault distinguishes between a Nietzschean will to knowledge and a Heideggerian opening of new paths in philosophy.

³⁶ See Foucault, "Structuralism and Poststructuralism," *Essential Works, Volume 2*, 446.

³⁷ Although Foucault argues for a radical break between epistemes at the level of the structuring of knowledge, he does allow for significant continuity of elements and forces at play. For example, he argues that the classical episteme is characterised by a binary system of pure representation, in which the signifier is conceived of as directly and perfectly representing the signified, within the distribution of representations constituted by "mathesis" and the "table." This epistemic structure eliminates the ternary relation between signifier, signified, and conjunction (the "being of language") that had characterised Western thought prior to the classical era. However, this shift introduces a tension that leads to a third element reappearing in the late eighteenth century in the form of an intermediary structure (that of labour within analysis of wealth, the organism within natural history, system of inflection within the study of language) necessary to constituting

In other words, Foucault refuses to adopt either Nietzsche's or Heidegger's proposals for a mode of thought and practice thought after the death of God and the last man, because each threatens to reinscribe a subtle new "ordo" to replace the Christian one coming to an end (the will to power as transvaluing all values, the gods to come as constituting a horizon of meaning). As has been seen, however, Foucault equally rules out the notion that affirmation of finite, immanent difference can occur, in an unqualified fashion, within the horizon of the death of God. Hence, with these options excluded, the solution remaining to him is performative. He does not seek to overcome the death of God as such, entangling himself in the problems of attempting to 'overcome' God or metaphysical thinking. Neither does he simply remain within the horizon of the death of God, but dynamically situates his work within an imminent movement beyond it. By explicitly holding, moreover, that this movement is merely a possibility that appears to be emerging, however probable is its occurrence, he refuses to step outside the confines of the historical situation to which he finds himself immanent. Rather, insofar as he is correct that we are on the cusp of a decisive epistemic shift, then, his work is not only consistently immanent (it is immanent to an actually existing situation), but effective in signalling and thus contributing to the anticipated transition.³⁸ Foucault's is a subtle performance, which would escape the impossibilities of transgression and the death of God by carefully delineating what it is possible to say consistently regarding the latter, within its shadow.

No less than the drama of transgression, however, such performance loses coherence in its repetition, for its power comes precisely from reflecting and effecting this transition. The anticipated event must occur; "new thought" must become possible and be actualised.³⁹ As Foucault will say in 1969, in relation to the author, it is:

...not enough to keep repeating that God and man have died a common death. Instead we must map the space left empty by the death of the author, follow the distribution of gaps and breaches, and watch for the openings this disappearance uncovers.⁴⁰

And to the extent that thought remains trapped within this moment of emergent change, the problematic relation to religion, arising from transgression, tends to be reinscribed. As seen, transgression could only affirm of finite being that upon which transgression of the absent God cast light. And while constituting a genuine and potentially liberating affirmation of human finitude, the restriction of thought to the repetition of this specific affirmation not only offered diminishing returns, but raised the question whether the absent God thus constitutes a

the relation between signifier and signified. Tension now emerges in relation to the sustainability of the classical conception of representation itself. The modern episteme transposes this tension into a new structure, constituting 'labour,' the 'organism' and 'language' as quasi-transcendentals, intersecting as planes of a "trihedron" that simultaneously define the condition of possibility of knowledge and its object. In turn, the risk to the unity of knowledge, within this complex framework, will see the emergence of the figure of man as the single object and subject of these spheres of knowledge. See Foucault, *Les mots et les choses*, 57-58, 229ff, 249; Foucault, *The Order of Things*, 46-47, 236ff, 257;

³⁸ Even if he is incorrect, his thought remains consistent by virtue of its intentional lack of certainty.

³⁹ "New thought" is how Foucault describes the thought of Gilles Deleuze in this period.

⁴⁰ See Foucault, "What is an Author?," 209. (translation slightly modified.)

condition of immanent discourse and a limit upon its scope. Similarly, Foucault's performance in *The Order of Things* is genuinely *immanent* to a specific moment of the death of God and thus affirms the very possibility of an immanent discourse beyond the long death of God (and man). Yet to the extent that thought is restricted, over time, to that single kind of immanent act, the question arises as to whether the thought of immanence is after all decisively circumscribed by the horizon of the death of God. Again the dependence is indirect and negative, and even more abstractly formal—transgression of God has been displaced by the question of how to think the disappearance of God and man—God no longer appearing to constitute even a compelling object of transgression. The logic is essentially the same, however—for the death of God appears to place a limit upon the scope of immanent affirmation and thus upon the possibility of a thoroughgoing immanent discourse.

To Have Done With the Death of God

How then does Foucault seek to avoid merely "repeating that God and man have died a common death"? The answer would appear to be provided by his analysis of power into the 1970s, which pursues a thoroughly immanent exploration and articulation of power, beyond it would seem the 'reach' of both deaths. However, if this is so, then, the crisis of Foucault's thought in the mid-1970s can equally be taken to constitute the limit of this attempt to have done with the death of God and man. This crisis is anticipated in the opening remarks to his 1976 course at the Collège de France, "*Society Must be Defended*." There, Foucault portrays his work as caught between two difficulties: on the one hand, he fears that his research into the operation of power—tactically fragmentary against the unity of hegemonic discourses of power—is "making no progress, and it's all leading nowhere. It's all repetitive, and it doesn't add up... perhaps we're not saying anything at all."⁴¹ Moreover, whatever advances are made risk being immediately "recoded, recolonized" by power.⁴² On the other hand, he recognises that:

...if we try to protect the fragments we have dug up, don't we run the risk of building, with our own hands a unitary discourse? That is what we are being invited to do, that is the trap that being set for us by all those say, "It's all very well, but where does it get us?"⁴³

In a subtle iteration of the dynamics of his earlier thought, Foucault is faced, once more, with the alternatives of an act (his fragmentary researches), which bears an immanent power of critique of the dominant order, but which cannot define progress beyond that order, without rupturing the constitutive limits of that act (its specificity, local nature)—it can only be repeated, even as its repetition over time tends to diminish its efficacy—and an act which reinscribes order. Moreover, this latter danger arguably has roots in Foucault's own practice: as has been variously argued, the very attempt to describe the operations of power immanently down to its "microphysics" and insinuations into the "capillaries" of society tends toward a

⁴¹ Michel Foucault, "*Society Must Be Defended*": *Lectures at the Collège de France, 1975-76*, edited by Mauro Bertani and Alessandro Fontana, translated by David Macey (London and New York: Allen Lane, 2003), 4.

⁴² *Ibid.*, 11.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, 11.

subtle new transcendentalism, best exemplified by the relational grid of analysis of power emerging in *The Will to Knowledge*.⁴⁴ As ubiquitous, power becomes, in effect, the conditioning, structuring quasi-transcendental truth of human experience.⁴⁵ And by offering ever finer articulations of power,⁴⁶ Foucault inadvertently makes the socio-political and subjective spaces thus delineated more readily identifiable and more easily subject to power.⁴⁷ To this extent, arguably—and a far more extensive analysis of this period is warranted, but beyond the scope of this article—the attempt to have done with the death of God and man in favour of a thoroughgoing immanent discourse, thus not only sees a repetition of the problematic dynamics shared both by the act of transgression and Foucault’s subsequent ‘performative’ solution to the paradoxes of the death of God. It additionally tends to reinscribes a problematic transcendental trace of the Christian “ordo” precisely when it attempts to ‘overcome’ definitively the death of God and man.

Later Foucault: A Significant Transformation

I wish to argue that Foucault breaks free from such repetition of the peculiar dynamics of immanent thought in the shadow of the death of God via a transformation of his relation to the limit, signalled in comments he makes during the discussion that immediately followed his 1978 lecture, “What is Critique?”⁴⁸ This transformation is one among several in Foucault’s work in the late 1970s, and like many of them remains largely subterranean in his writings, lectures, and interviews in this period, but can nonetheless be discerned in its affects upon his later analyses. Clarifying what he meant in his lecture by the notion of “the will not to governed,” he states,

I was not referring to something that would be a fundamental anarchism, that would be like an originary freedom, absolutely and wholeheartedly resistant to any governmentalization. I did not say it, but this does not mean that I absolutely exclude it.⁴⁹

⁴⁴ Michel Foucault, *The Will to Knowledge: The History of Sexuality, Volume 1* (London: Penguin, 1990), 92-95.

⁴⁵ Even if his researches are always local and specific, the claim that power is ubiquitous tends to undermine critical immanent discourse. Later, Foucault will claim that the infinite reach of power was never meant to imply infinite control, but, in this period, in the late 1970s, he, in fact, has few resources to exploit this distinction effectively.

⁴⁶ Gilles Deleuze, “On the New Philosophers (Plus a More General Problem),” in Deleuze, *Two Regimes of Madness: Texts and Interviews 1975-1995* (New York: Semiotext(e), 2006), 139. Gilles Deleuze described his and Foucault’s work in this period, as “trying to create concepts with fine articulations, extremely differentiated concepts, to escape gross dualisms” and to generate “creative functions,” which would no longer appeal to an “empty and vain subject,” but be capable of engaging and resisting the full complexity of the functioning of power.

⁴⁷ For an example of how Foucault’s analyses of power have been used to better extend the reach of power, see Barbara Townley, “Foucault, Power/Knowledge and its relevance for HRM,” *Academy of Management Review* 18 (1993): 518-545.

⁴⁸ Michel Foucault, “What is Critique?,” in *The Politics of Truth*, edited by Sylvère Lotringer and L. Hochroth (New York: Semiotext(e), 1997), 23-82.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, 72.

Judith Butler has highlighted the complex “staging” involved in these apparently incidental comments.⁵⁰ The paradoxes of Foucault’s “I did not say it” — a denial of speaking that is itself not only speech, but a subtle means of saying, in its denial, what one claims not to have said — allow him to posit the possibility that freedom requires an originary freedom only in withdrawal from any commitment to such a position. In so doing, he does not crudely embrace a notion, which would previously have been anathema to his thought, Butler argues, but “draw[s] from the term he refuses,” “invoking it so that we might relive its resonances, and know its power,” such that in the process “a nearly collapsible critical distance is performed for us.” In other words, Foucault finds a way to allow his thought be affected by a notion of freedom which, however problematic he might judge it to be, has been central to the Western effort to articulate and defend freedom, and thus may well ‘hold’ certain vital intuitions and insights concerning freedom. Moreover, he opens a space between his own discourse of freedom and this (for him) impossible, but richly resonant notion, which enables him to push beyond the former’s terms, preoccupations and limits and to risk engaging radically ‘other’ ideas. At the same time, such a space always threatens to collapse because the subtleties of the staging may break down, due either to a naively excessive embrace of the impossibly ‘other’ notion, or a failure to truly stage its im/possibility. Crucially, for Butler, Foucault thus exercises a political freedom in relation to his own thought: he refuses the subtle subjugation (to an order that incorporates resistance within its hegemony), which would require him to remain, as a radical intellectual, firmly on the side of an immanent freedom and to reject ‘originary freedom.’ It thus signals, for her, the “virtue” of the later Foucault’s thought: its willingness to place itself in question, to refuse those limits, subtle or otherwise, which it might place or allow be placed upon it.

Butler’s broader concern is to demonstrate how Foucault’s work can be aligned with a certain kind of progressive politics, that his critique is not merely a form of “fault-finding,” but continually opens itself to the possibility of what is, on the face of it, anathema to it. And this concern leads to a subtle emphasis upon the *relation* (or relation-in-difference) between Foucault’s thought and that which is other than it. Stepping back from these concerns, and paying attention to the crisis of thought, through which Foucault was struggling in that period, makes it possible to detect in these comments the beginning of a more basic rethinking, on Foucault’s part, of his relation to the limit and, in turn, of his relation to religion — indeed, a rethinking of his relation to the limit that is ultimately exemplified by his relation to religion.

As David Macey points out, a deep intellectual crisis crystallises in 1977, for Foucault, following the publication of Baudrillard’s *Forget Foucault*, or, rather more precisely, in light of the lack of support from colleagues against Baudrillard’s attack.⁵¹ And although Foucault’s initial (relative) silence does not last long, he struggles to reframe his thought over the next

⁵⁰ For what follows, see Judith Butler, “What is Critique? An Essay on Foucault’s Virtue,” accessed at <http://eipcp.net/transversal/0806/butler/en>, on 21/05/2012. Originally published in David Ingram (ed.), *The Political: Readings in Continental Philosophy* (London: Basil Blackwell, 2002), 212-227.

⁵¹ David Macey, *The Lives of Michel Foucault* (New York: Vintage, 1994), 360; Jean Baudrillard, *Forget Foucault*, translated by Phil Beitchman, Lisa Hildreth and Mark Polizzoti (New York: Semiotext(e), 1987).

several years: a brief rapprochement with the *nouveaux philosophes*⁵² gives way to his analyses of biopower, which in turn is displaced by a focus on pastoral power and governmentality, then, specifically, by liberalism, (not to mention his writings on Iran) before the ‘thinness’ of the freedom of the liberal *homo economicus* drives Foucault back to ancient Christian sources in search of more significant resources for a contemporary notion of critical subjectivity.⁵³ Taken seriously, Foucault’s intellectual crisis means that he cannot engage with radically ‘other’ possibilities of thought, such as the potential necessity of an ‘originary will’ to the exercise of freedom, always already safely in the mode of withdrawing from them, confident that his basic framework of thought is viable before their challenge. There is a vulnerability beneath the sophisticated performance of his comments at the end of “What is Critique?” (One need only consider the distance Foucault must travel, what he must put at risk, even to broach the possibility that after all, the individual may need to possess an originary will, constituted beyond historical-political forces, to be able truly to exercise freedom.) He is confronted here, and later when he is struggling to elaborate a viable notion of subjectivity, with the real prospect that his work is “leading nowhere” and that such ‘other’ notions are necessary for a contemporary thought adequate to human experience. Insofar as he can no longer be certain that his project is capable of articulating and supporting human freedom, then, the question about an originary will is genuinely posed, and the possibility faced of an affirmative answer that would radically undermine his project. The “staging” identified by Butler is at play, but across greater discontinuities and with greater stakes.

What is the ultimate significance of these greater discontinuities and stakes? Foucault risks broaching a possibility of thought, which, were he ultimately to embrace it, would fatally rupture and undermine his critical project. He certainly seeks to use this possibility, as it were, as a beacon to light the space beyond the current limits of his thought, drawing him beyond his conceptual apparatus and resources, the traditions to which he belongs, his own passions, preoccupations, and biases. However, the crucial point is that this is a movement that he cannot delimit, but which he must embrace even if it should take him beyond an *impossible limit* for his thought. And to the extent that he risks this movement without reserve, it has the potential to lead him to think otherwise *maximally*. That is to say, if it has not shied away from the demands of thought (in this case for an adequate ground of freedom) even to the point of rupturing the immanent framework of his thought, and if it survives this test, Foucault’s thought will have been brought to the limit of immanent discourse (and brought immanent discourse to its limits), opening itself to maximal change.

Such a practice differs from the transgressive use of religious ideas and practices to enrich, complicate, and destabilise modern post-religious thought, because the former presupposes that God has never existed—that religious experience, for instance, is empty as such. The ‘religious question,’ which his earlier work faces, constitutes an ultimately problematic trace of dependence upon the God who has never existed, *in spite of* its conception of religion.

⁵² See, for example, Foucault’s review of Andre Glucksmann’s *The Master Thinkers: Michel Foucault*, “La grande colère des faits” in Foucault, *Dits et Écrits II, 1976-1988*, edited by Daniel Defert and François Ewald (Paris: Quarto Gallimard, 2001), 277-281.

⁵³ See Michel Foucault, *The Birth of Biopolitics: Lectures at the Collège de France 1978-1979*, edited by Michel Senellart, translated by Graham Burchell (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008), 267ff.

By contrast, this new practice, in effect, repeatedly opens itself to the possibility that 'God' is not dead after all, to the notion that an originary will is both viable and necessary for contemporary thought. By incorporating the trace of the religious or metaphysical within thought's performance via this openness, Foucault produces a practice, which, if it is repeatedly confronted with the real possibility of its own lack of viability, is (performatively) immanent 'without remainder' insofar as it meets that test. Rather than attempt to eliminate the theological remainder of a would-be immanent discourse, and thus to think purely immanently (with all of its dangers of reinscription of the transcendent or transcendental), Foucault instead broaches the potential necessity of that remainder to thought, so that, should an immanent discourse be shown to remain possible in that encounter, it is no longer circumscribed by this 'remainder.' By engaging the possibility that there is a 'beyond' or 'other side' of the finite, immanent limit, and accepting the demand not to circumscribe concepts such as freedom in order to refuse such a beyond or other side, Foucault opens the way for an immanent discourse which would repeatedly rupture any subtle transcendentalism that it might tend to reinscribe. Moreover, it remains maximally open to becoming other, by placing its own very possibility and limits in question. As such, his approach does not so much resolve the earlier problem of a persistent theological horizon of immanent thought, but refigures the relation of immanence to its other, incorporating openness to it as a positive dimension of thought within its performance, in a manner that fundamentally defines a new relation to the limit.

It may appear excessive to find in Foucault's brief comments concerning originary will a whole redefinition of his relation to the limit. The point, however, is that such a structure can be seen to be operative in Foucault's work subsequently, in particular in relation to religion, as the dependence of thought upon religion exemplifies this 'virtue': his analysis of mysticism as the first great form of revolt in the West, his engagement with what he termed the 'political spirituality' of the Iranian revolution, and his examination of the significance of early Christian practices of the self for both modern subjectivity and its critique.

Foucault and Mysticism as Revolt

In his comments at the end of "What is Critique?," Foucault already links the question of the necessity of originary will to freedom to the question of early modern Christian mysticism as a form of revolt. He acknowledges that he is "haunted" by the fact that

If the matrix of this critical attitude in the Western world must be sought out in religious attitudes and in connection with the exercise of pastoral power in the Middle Ages, all the same it is surprising that mysticism is seen as an individual experience while institutional and political struggles are viewed as absolutely unified, and in any case, constantly referring to one another. I would say that one of the first great forms of revolt in the West was mysticism.⁵⁴

Foucault is primarily haunted, not by mysticism as such, but by the idea that a most intensely individual form of experience, apparently apart from the political sphere, is a profoundly political act capable of connecting and uniting people in revolt. His analysis of mysticism thus

⁵⁴ Foucault, "What is Critique?," 74-5.

clearly bears parallels with his complex broaching of the possibility that freedom is grounded by an originary will not constituted, at its most basic level, by historic-political forces. However, if Foucault is not primarily concerned in these comments with mysticism as such, the question arises as to how mysticism functions as a revolutionary force. Perhaps, Foucault's clearest answer comes in one of his Iranian writings, when he talks of "what we [in the West] have forgotten since the Renaissance and the great crisis of Christianity, a *political spirituality*."⁵⁵ In turn, the notion of mysticism as a political spirituality (or rather a dimension of one) is most clarified in *Security, Territory, Population*. Here mysticism is shown to resist pastoral power insofar as it depends on the soul seeing itself in God rather than being examined by another and progresses according to personal divine revelation rather than external teaching. Equally, it undermines the pastorate's usual notion of 'progress': mystical illumination constitutes an illumination that blinds, in which knowledge becomes a kind of ignorance.⁵⁶ Community is presented, by Foucault, as another form of counter-conduct against the pastorate, with communities often forming around the refusal of the pastorate's external authority.⁵⁷ Although he doesn't make the connection explicitly in his rapid survey, the direct and negative mystical experience of God sits well with the notion of a community resistant to pastoral power. More precisely, mysticism can be thought of as offering, in its most intense form, the mode of existence of a community which does not only resist authority externally, but also internally to a significant extent. The direct, individual encounter with God creates a community of individuals, in which any form of communal authority remains secondary, however enlightened it might be deemed to be. As such, mysticism is principle both of individuality and revolutionary community.

In *Security, Territory, Population*, Foucault is explicit that modern secular forms of counter-conduct (such as revolution) do not have a direct relationship with their religious precedents at the level of ideology. However, they bear a more complex relationship, in which, for instance, religious communities resistant to the pastorate directly influence utopian revolutionary movements, at what might be termed a formal level.⁵⁸ His comments after "What is critique?" similarly suggest that the form of the revolutionary will, with its complex interplay of the individual and communal, equally owes a 'formal' debt to mysticism. And, thus, though not that which primarily haunts him, the question hangs in the air as to the extent to which the revolutionary depends upon the mystical, as constituting a horizon of possibility for thinking it. If later revolutionary thinking does not draw directly from the ideological content of Christian mysticism, does it nonetheless depend upon a specific political structure that, in turn, depends on Christian ideas of individual mystical experience and communal spirituality, which in turn are dependent upon the idea of a unifying transcendent order and reality? (Moreover, the force of mystical experience and communal ultimately lies in the en-

⁵⁵ Michel Foucault, "What are the Iranians Dreaming About?," in Janet Afary and Kevin B. Anderson, *Foucault and the Iranian Revolution: Gender and the Seductions of Islamism* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 2005), 209.

⁵⁶ Michel Foucault, *Security, Territory, Population: Lectures at the Collège de France, 1977-1978*, edited by Michel Senellart, translated by Graham Burchell (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007), 212-3.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, 211-12.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, 357.

counter with God.) Or, more minimally, does revolt depend upon evoking the weight of a shared tradition of singular force, capable of supporting in its positive, historical density and imaginative power such revolutionary action? His comment in Iran, recalling the West's forgotten political spirituality, takes seriously this notion of a political spirituality, as at least meriting attention—not just in its Iranian, but its Western form—thus, his “I can already hear the French laughing, but I know that they are wrong.”⁵⁹ The French are laughing precisely because Foucault opens his thought, if not to accepting the religious horizon of mysticism as such, then, at least, to the notion, that originary or transcendent structures of experience or the tradition which has supported them, may be necessary to revolt.

In other words, Foucault opens his thought to that which is ‘other’ than it to the point of rupturing the very premises of his work heretofore, while wagering that it is possible to allow his thought be affected by this other, while remaining within the bounds of immanence. Indeed, it will only be after his long detour through Greece, Rome and the early Christian world that Foucault will return in his very final lecture at the Collège de France in 1984 to the question of mysticism.⁶⁰ He does so to suggest that the critical force of early modern Christian mysticism, in significant part, is itself a function of the fact that the more basic critical impulse of *parrhesia* has survived within it across the Christian centuries. Or rather, that at least a somewhat ambiguous Christian form of it has preserved *parrhesia* at the margins of Western subjective practice.⁶¹ As such, across several years, Foucault is able finally to bring the act of opening his thought to mysticism to completion, concluding that such openness need not lead to the affirmation of the dependence of revolution upon a religious trace. Instead, it is possible rather to recognise in early modern Christian mysticism, as its vital force, the immanent resources of Greek *parrhesia*.

Political Spirituality of the Iranian Revolution

The embrace of an ‘other’ possibility of thought is even more pronounced in what George Stauth terms the “excited attention” Foucault pays to the Iranian revolution.⁶² And, arguably, the status of this ‘otherness’ is crucial to unpicking the problematic dimensions of the “political spirituality” he discovers there.⁶³ Foucault finds that, in the revolution, a people are enabled to change a regime, but more deeply to “change ourselves,” “[o]ur way of being, our relationships with others, with things, with eternity, with God, etc”, through a “profound spirituality.” Here “subjectivity” was no mere product of power, but the principal site of re-

⁵⁹ Foucault, “What are the Iranians Dreaming About?,” 209.

⁶⁰ Michel Foucault, *The Courage of Truth: The Government of Self and Others II: Lectures at the Collège de France 1983-1984*, edited by Frédéric Gros, translated by Graham Burchell (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011), 337.

⁶¹ See, McSweeney, “Foucault and Theology,” 137-8.

⁶² See Georg Stauth, “Revolution in Spiritless Times: An Essay on Michel Foucault’s Enquiries into the Iranian Revolution,” in Barry Smart (ed.), *Michel Foucault: Critical Assessments*. Volume 3 (London: Routledge, 1994), 381.

⁶³ Foucault, “What Are The Iranians Dreaming About?,” 209.

sistance to it.⁶⁴ It offered a notion of resistance to power not merely tactical, mobile and fragmented but one which “transforms a thousand forms of discontent, hatred, misery, and despair, into a *force*” and gives “an irreducible strength to everything, from the depth of a people, that is capable of opposing state power,” uniting it in an “absolutely collective will.”⁶⁵ More precisely, “political spirituality,” is “a form of expression, a mode of social relations, a supple and widely accepted elemental organisation, a way of being together, a way of speaking and listening, something that allows one to be listened to by others, and to yearn for something with them at the same time as they yearn for it.”⁶⁶ It is a mode of subjectivity that makes the revolution possible, but is not the source of the revolution as such. This derives from the ordinary people, from their “unrelenting plea to denounce injustice, to criticise the government, to rise up against unacceptable measures”⁶⁷—impulses informed by religion certainly, but in complex intersection with broader cultural and political traditions, as well as unfolding historical experience, and so irreducible to it.⁶⁸ Foucault also recognises, however, that “political spirituality” is specifically a movement giving “a permanent role in political life to the traditional structures of Islamic society.” For him, however, these two dimensions of political spirituality are the “converse and inverse” of one another. Political spirituality is a movement toward Islamic government and values, which incorporates “a spiritual dimension into political life” and in which “Islamic” political programmes and goals would not be an obstacle to the individual as willing subject.⁶⁹

As in the case of Christian mysticism, Foucault thus finds in this political spirituality a form revolutionary action, which is simultaneously individual and communal—one, which is bound to the singularity of Islam as a religion, yet which values the individual. As such, moreover, it is radically ‘other’ than the modern Western tradition of revolution—indeed, as has been seen, it is literally laughable to a Western audience. The whole tenor of his writings is, as Stauth points out, to push both himself and his readers to treat the Iranian revolution on its own terms as a novel, unprecedented historical *event*⁷⁰—to be attentive and “respectful when such a singularity arises.”⁷¹ He is explicitly concerned not to interpret this *Islamic* revolution through the lens of Western categories and to avoid the prejudices of the West’s “thousand-year reproach” of Islam for “fanaticism.”⁷²

These various concerns reflect a complex position. To allow the Iranian revolution its otherness, Foucault must certainly attempt to describe it on its own terms without orientalist

⁶⁴ Michel Foucault, “Iran: The Spirit of a World Without Spirit,” in Afary and Anderson, *Foucault and the Iranian Revolution*, 255.

⁶⁵ Michel Foucault, “Tehran: Faith Against The Shah,” in Afary and Anderson, *Foucault and the Iranian Revolution*, 202-203. Translation modified.

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, 202.

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, 202.

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, 201-203.

⁶⁹ Foucault, “What Are The Iranians Dreaming About?,” 207.

⁷⁰ Stauth, “Revolution in Spiritless Times,” 379.

⁷¹ Michel Foucault, “Is It Useless to Revolt?,” in Afary and Anderson, *Foucault and the Iranian Revolution*, 267.

⁷² Michel Foucault, “Foucault’s Response to Atoussa H.,” in Afary and Anderson, *Foucault and the Iranian Revolution*, 210.

nostalgia, reductions or dismissals. However, he must also recognise that such a revolution is strictly impossible in the contemporary intellectual framework of the West—it remains a “singular” event *within a different context*. His analysis is a call to engage with it as ‘other,’ as an impossible limit—in order to push Western thought maximally beyond itself, not to embrace it as a model for the West or to rediscover the notion of a religious revolution. Foucault’s focus on Islamic political spirituality, as offering primarily a form of revolutionary action open to individual experience, suggests a recognition that, perhaps, what might have to be accepted from the Iranian revolution in the West is the necessity to modern revolution of a unifying religious spirituality, if only in the sense of dependence a singular religious tradition for the very concept of unitary action.

The problem with Foucault’s analysis, arguably, is that he is too intent in ascribing ‘otherness’ to the Iranian revolution. He fails to recognise the extent to which the revolution belongs to a historical situation different from, but related to the Western context. Thus where other contemporary observers could discern diverse and even divergent movements within the revolution, many with parallels in Western political contexts (not least Marxist and feminist movements, in addition to more explicitly religiously-motivated groupings), and where they could anticipate the tensions and dangers of the increasing prominence of a narrative, which characterised the revolution as Islamic, Foucault too readily saw the people united by an “absolutely collective will.”⁷³ This is not to suggest that Foucault was necessarily wrong in thinking that Islamic political spirituality played a significant role in uniting the people. Rather, as Michiel Leezenberg points out, his refusal to bring typically Western tools to bear on the situation, not least his own analytics of power, leaves him without critical tools to interrogate the revolution and leads to conclusions at odds with the basic thrust of his earlier genealogies.⁷⁴ As such, Stauth concludes, Foucault’s very concern to avoid orientalism ultimately renders him vulnerable to it.⁷⁵

Foucault’s engagement with the Iranian revolution again follows the pattern of openness to an ‘other’ possibility, impossible for his thought as such—openness, if necessary, to the point of rupture of its existing framework. In this instance, however, the subtle ‘staging’ required for such a performance has gone awry, in no small part because of the complexities of the double otherness of the political spirituality of the revolution. That is, Foucault recognises the impossibility as such of the revolution’s political spirituality for Western thought (*vis-à-vis* its rejection of the early modern conjunction of mysticism and revolt). However, he fails to interrogate the impossibilities (and possibilities) of this same political spirituality within a

⁷³ For instance, Kate Millet, who visited Iran at the time, argued that the revolution was from the outset “secular and religious, female and male, gay and straight, non-Islamic and Islamic,” with “deep contradictions”—in particular, between the centrality of the Shah as the galvanising figure of the revolution and those who struggled for the “rights of women, of gay men, of workers, or religious and ethnic minorities.” See Kate Millet, *Going to Iran* (New York: Coward, McCann & Geoghan, 1982).

⁷⁴ Michiel Leezenberg, “Michel Foucault on the Islamic Revolution in Iran,” in James Bernauer and Jeremy Carrette (eds.), *Foucault and Theology: The Politics of Religious Experience* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2004), 109-110. Leezenberg goes further to suggest that Foucault reverts to a domination-resistance dichotomy, at odds with his notion of power, and a universalist ethics, at odds with the whole thrust of his work until that time.

⁷⁵ Stauth, “Revolution in Spiritless Times,” 385-386.

quasi-modernised Iran. In other words, his analysis prioritises the otherness of the revolution for Western thought and, in the process, amplifies the otherness of the revolution, such that dynamic movement between his own position and its 'other' becomes distorted.

Christianity and the Greeks

A third moment of Foucault's 'virtue' is encountered in his engagement with Christian practices of the self in the early 1980s. James Bernauer and, more recently, Jonathan Tran have argued that Foucault was fascinated with these practices and that his ethics of the self owes more to Christian than to pagan practices of the self.⁷⁶ Such an argument undoubtedly touches upon an important dimension of Foucault's work in the period until 1981, but is difficult to square with his obvious passion for the Greek notion of the care of the self, once he had discovered its full significance, and the impetus this discovery gave to his work.⁷⁷ Once more, these divergent aspects of Foucault's evolving position can be understood to reflect a new relation to the limit.

The late 1980 Dartmouth/Howison lectures, published in English as "About the Beginning of the Hermeneutics of the Self," broadly sum up the conclusions of Foucault's 1980 and, then soon-to-be-delivered 1981 courses at the Collège de France ("On The Government of the Living" and "Subjectivity and Truth," respectively),⁷⁸ and offer an important window upon his fascination with Christian practices of the self. Not least, they suggest a Foucault who, having examined early Christian practices in 1980, turns to Greek and Roman practices seeking an alternative, but without finding one. Foucault does discover in the ancient Greeks and Romans a distinctive set of practices of truth-telling, centred on "the necessity of telling the truth about oneself, the role of the master and the master's discourse, the long way that leads finally to the emergence of the self," and a notion of the self (and its truth) less to be uncovered than to be constituted. However, these practices remained bound to a notion of what he terms the "gnomic self," in which "the force of the truth is one with the form of the will."⁷⁹ In other words, at this point Foucault accepts Pierre Hadot's argument that Greek and Roman practices of the self centred on a kind of care of the self, certainly, but one defined as participation of the self in universal truth.⁸⁰ For Foucault, this offers little by way of resources with which to articulate a notion of subjectivity capable of critiquing and contesting the modern subject.

⁷⁶ James Bernauer, "Cry of Spirit," in Foucault, *Religion and Culture*, xi-xvii; Jonathan Tran, *Foucault and Theology* (London and New York: T & T Clark, 2011), 95ff.

⁷⁷ Frédéric Gros, "Course Context" in Michel Foucault, *The Hermeneutics of the Subject: Lectures at the Collège de France, 1981-82*, edited by Frédéric Gros, translated by Graham Burchell (New York: Macmillan Palgrave, 2005), 510-1, 515-6.

⁷⁸ Michel Foucault, "About the Beginnings of the Hermeneutics of the Self," in Foucault, *Religion and Culture*, 173; Michel Foucault, "On The Government of the Living," in *Essential Works of Michel Foucault 1954-1984, Volume 1*, edited by Paul Rabinow (London and New York: Penguin, 2000), 81-85; Michel Foucault, "Subjectivity and Truth," in *Essential Works, Volume 1*, 87-92

⁷⁹ Foucault, "The Hermeneutics of the Self," 168.

⁸⁰ Pierre Hadot, *Philosophy as a Way of Life: Spiritual Exercises from Socrates to Foucault*, introduction by Arnold I. Davidson, translated by Michael Chase (Oxford: Blackwell, 1995), 211.

The Dartmouth/Howison lectures show Foucault returning to Christian practices of the self and concluding that they take over and fundamentally refigured these distinctive elements of Greek and Roman culture, but placing the emphasis upon a notion of the deep truth of the self, and the idea that this truth can be grasped paradoxically, only in self-sacrifice. (The hermeneutics of the self is made possible, only insofar as the individual is willing to sacrifice the self to the exhaustive verbalisation of thought.)⁸¹ Moreover, Foucault holds that Christianity not only assimilates the fundamental elements of pagan practices of the self, but that “in Christianity we see the development of a much more complex technology of the self,” capable of distinguishing between several forms of knowledge where pagan practices aim at “the permanent superimposition of the subject of knowledge and the subject of the will.”⁸² Not least, “knowledge of the self takes shape in the constitution of thought as a field of subjective data which are to be interpreted.”⁸³ Foucault, moreover, acknowledges that this Christian technology of the self has been central to the Western notion of subjectivity, with modern subjectivity constituted in the effort to retain the hermeneutics of the subject while replacing Christian self-sacrifice with a positive subject. The lectures conclude with Foucault suggesting that, perhaps, the moment has come to end this search, dispensing both with the Christian notion of self-sacrifice, but also the hermeneutics of the self which it supports and which modern thought has sought to preserve in positive form.

That Foucault cannot suggest how this might be done indicates that this proposal is as yet only a potential point of departure for his thought, and indicates that, heretofore, Foucault has been grappling with a different option. Key here is his recognition that “the deep contradiction, or if you want, the great richness of the Christian technologies [is]: no truth about the self without a sacrifice of the self.”⁸⁴ Together with the claim that the Christian self has been central to Western subjectivity, this text suggests that Foucault has broached the possibility that the paradoxical Christian notion of self-sacrifice as practice of the self is at the heart of the problem of modern subjectivity *and* offers the best resources to contest and undermine that modern notion of subjectivity. The Christian self both inscribes a “deep contradiction” into Western subjectivity and may contain the rich paradox, which at least undoes the problematic modern solution to that contradiction. Clearly, such a solution is not fully satisfactory, since the same feature of the Christian self appears as source both of the problem of and solution to modern subjectivity. More importantly, however, it suggests that Foucault broaches the possibility that the Christian self, in all of its singularity (as arising out of the Christian event and early Christianity), constitutes the horizon of thinking about subjectivity in Western thought. For all of its attempted universality, Western reason, in this reading, grapples with the possibilities generated and the problems posed by a singular conception of reason bequeathed to it by early Christianity.

Foucault’s engagement with the early Christian self, thus, parallels his engagements with Christian mysticism and Islamic “political spirituality.” His search for an alternative to

⁸¹ Foucault, “The Hermeneutics of the Self,” 179.

⁸² *Ibid.*, 180.

⁸³ *Ibid.*, 180.

⁸⁴ *Ibid.*, 180.

the early Christian self in Greek and Roman practices, suggests that its conception of the self, does not readily accord with his work. In his comment that the Christian technology of the self is the richer, there is the subtle indication that “pagan” technology of the self is, in principle, the more appealing. The paradoxical Christian self thus constitutes an ‘other’ of his thought, which he allows to affect it, drawing it beyond its limits. However, unlike the case of Islamic political spirituality, a tension remains, such that Foucault’s openness is a genuine, but reluctant one. In other words, Bernauer and Tran are correct to suggest that Foucault’s work exhibits a deep engagement and even fascination with Christian practices of the self. However, such engagement and fascination need to be located within a more complex dynamic. Not least, Foucault’s discovery of the ethics of care of the self as an aesthetic practice of self-constitution ultimately demonstrates to him that it is possible to engage the challenge of thinking subjectivation against the modern subject, within the Western tradition, without finally having to depend upon a paradoxical Christian notion of self-sacrifice as care of the self. As such, Foucault’s fascination with Christian thinking, at least in this respect, comes to an end and his thought achieves a significant thinking otherwise.

These three instances—Foucault’s engagements with Christian mysticism, the political spirituality of the Iranian revolution and early Christian practices of the self—confirm the transformation in his relation to the limit signalled by his comments at the end of “What is Critique?” They reveal a practice not without its dangers or ambiguities, but which promises to transform the paradoxical relationship of immanence and the religion/the theological after the death of God, from a problem to a locus of maximal thinking otherwise.

Conclusion

This article has sought to demonstrate that Foucault’s earlier attempts to construct an immanent practice occur within the shadow of the death of God and that this practice is repeatedly circumscribed by an indirect ‘theological’ horizon. It has sought to argue that the indirect ‘religious question’ thus generated does not constitute so much an opening to and point of resonance with the theological, but ultimately a problem for immanent discourse, which threatens to undermine the consistency and effectiveness of Foucault’s work and needs resolution. In turn, it has argued that from the late 1970s, Foucault reframes his conception of the immanent relation to the limit in rather different terms. Now rather than try to eliminate the residual, but problematic theological horizon that re-emerges from the effort to think immanence, he now builds his practice around openness to horizons of thought which would exceed and rupture his framework of thought if embraced, balancing such openness with the pursuit of immanence. Should his work survive this openness without rupture, an immanent practice emerges that has been taken to the limit, and thus involves the maximal degree possible of becoming other, of immanence-within-transcendence. These horizons are not necessarily religious or theological, certainly not in any traditional sense of the term, but encounters with the ‘other’ that is religion prove exemplary in Foucault’s later work for his refigured practice of immanence.

What, then, are the implications of such a reading? Briefly, it might be suggested that they are two-fold. First, such a reading complicates any notion that Foucault’s thought bears a resonance with theological or religious thinking, or defines the contemporary deconstructed

space of such discourse, or, indeed, that Foucault's writings and theology constitute discourses with their own prerogatives. To draw upon those moments in which Foucault's work is inscribed within an indirect theological horizon or opens itself variously to elements of religion as other, it is equally necessary to engage with the more fundamental problematic of which these moments are a part. As such, it might be argued that the key significance of Foucault's work for religion lies in his problematisation of the reason-religion relation and the ethos of thinking otherwise which he elaborates. To this extent, his work, then, suggests no straightforward 'theology after Foucault' or 'theology in dialogue with Foucault,' but invites and challenges religious thinking to engage deeply with the problematisation of discourse after the death of God. Of course, this is not as simple or simplistic as saying that Foucault's thought thereby demands immanence of religious and theological thinking. Rather, it is a matter of challenging religious and theological thinking to take seriously the gap between religious and immanent discourse and to risk engaging with it as 'other' of its thought.

Second, this reading of Foucault's relation to religion foregrounds the complexity of the pursuit of immanent discourse after the death of God. Of course, Foucault's is one response to this complexity, but it does highlight—to borrow Derrida's terms—that religion does return repeatedly as a question, potential limit, and thus a problem, for philosophical discourse after the death of God; that an immanent discourse remains within the long shadow of the death of God and that the question of immanent discourse needs to remain a problematised one. Such a reading thus poses important questions to recent continental philosophy (e.g. Badiou, Žižek and Agamben), which increasingly turns—via materialist readings of religion—to the resources of thinkers such as St. Paul and to notions such as messianicity and a politics of love.⁸⁵ Foucault affirms that thought must grapple with such figures and concepts, but equally cautions that the assumption that philosophy can engage religion entirely beyond the death of God may well lead to subtle re-inscriptions of problematic theological horizons of thought.

Finally, this reading clarifies an aspect of Foucault's practice, bringing to light something of the risks and dangers demanded by thinking otherwise and of the courage necessary to do so.

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⁸⁵ Žižek has argued that Derrida's notion of messianicity is undermined by the minimal theological horizon which it generates and upon which it depends for its vitality. Elsewhere I have argued that Žižek's alternative politics of Pauline love, reinscribes such a theological horizon, precisely insofar as he seeks to find in Paul a thoroughly immanent messianic practice. See John McSweeney, "Finitude and Violence: Žižek versus Derrida on Politics," *Kritike* 5.2 (2011): 41-58.