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## INTERVIEW

### **A Conversation with James Bernauer**

Edward McGushin, Stonehill College

In 1978 James Bernauer, then a doctoral candidate in philosophy at SUNY Stonybrook, travelled to Paris to attend Michel Foucault's lectures at the Collège de France.<sup>1</sup> Bernauer stayed in Paris until 1980, meeting with Foucault on several occasions, as he began the work that would eventually culminate in his influential book, *Michel Foucault's Force of Flight: Toward an Ethics for Thought*.<sup>2</sup> Bernauer has continued to work on and with Foucault's thought. In particular he has made important contributions to our understanding of the religious and theological implications and possibilities of Foucauldian thought.<sup>3</sup> But Bernauer's scholarship is not limited to his work on Foucault. He is also an important commentator on the thought of Hannah Arendt.<sup>4</sup> Perhaps most significant, especially in recent years, has been his research on the problem that originally motivated his philosophical questioning: the need to understand the roots, nature, and consequences of the Holocaust. Bernauer is currently the Director of the Center for Christian-Jewish Learning, and Kraft Family Professor in the Department of Philosophy, at Boston College.

Below is an abridged version of a conversation with Professor Bernauer that took place at his Boston College residence on June 26 and 27, 2012. A Stonehill Undergraduate Research Experience (SURE) grant from Stonehill College provided me with a research assistant and the resources necessary to capture, transcribe, and edit this conversation. I would like to thank my research assistant, Lauren Mahncke, for her diligent transcription of the interview and for her invaluable help as we prepared the following excerpts from that transcription. Not only did Mahncke transcribe and help edit the interview, but she also helped me recognize the importance of the deep current of personalism that shapes Bernauer's experience of Foucault and philosophy in general. This is a theme in the conversation that follows. I would also like to thank my videographer, Mike Archambault, who captured the interview.

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<sup>1</sup> *The Birth of Biopolitics*, 1978-1979, and *The Government of the Living*, 1979-1980.

<sup>2</sup> Humanities Press. 1990. Second edition in 2000.

<sup>3</sup> See for example, James Bernauer & Jeremy Carrette (ed.), *Michel Foucault and Theology: The Politics of Religious Experience* (Hampshire, UK: Ashgate, 2004). Also of note is Bernauer's foreword to Michel Foucault, *Religion and culture*, selected and edited by Jeremy R. Carrette (New York: Routledge, 1999).

<sup>4</sup> See J. W. Bernauer (ed.), *Amor Mundi: Explorations in the Faith and Thought of Hannah Arendt* (New York: Springer. 1987).

**Edward McGushin:** Do you see some of the sources of your religious vocation and your scholarly work in your personal biography, your childhood, and family life?

**James Bernauer:** Well, I guess to some extent everyone's biography affects them. The Cold War was absolutely decisive for my generation. We grew up with this clear sense that we were threatened with annihilation, there was this clear enemy, communism. It was a very philosophical age in some ways, I would say. I hadn't really reflected upon it in that way. But, I mean, I was in that generation where we had these tests in New York of the sirens and I would hide, underneath the desk. That was the thing; you had to take shelter when the sirens went off. We had to go through this process—I forget how often it was—maybe once a month. And one of the memories I have of that period is that Dorothy Day<sup>5</sup> would always sit with the Catholic workers outside in Times Square and she would never take shelter. We used to get the *Catholic Worker* in my home and so it was always featured. But it was also featured in the newspapers that there would always be this eccentric group in Times Square sitting down and then being arrested by the police.

**EM:** That made an impression on you?

**JB:** It did make an impression—Dorothy Day made a big impression. That was part of it. In terms of the Cold War, communism was everywhere. It was an undifferentiated reality. I mean everything somehow represented either the victory of communism or the defeat of communism. And of course communism was Godless Marxism. So, as a young kid you're talking about things you have no idea what the ideas are behind it, except you see brutal power, which I saw certainly in the way communism was presented through the media and the way it was—the 1956 revolution I remember clearly, I was at the time twelve years of age.<sup>6</sup> I remember following that. It was part of the appeal of Foucault—a more differentiated understanding. I think he is sort of a post-Cold War thinker in that way.

**EM:** How would you place your choice to join the Jesuits into that context? Was it a matter of taking a stand in that confrontation with communism?

**JB:** Well, I think one of the things I've greatly underestimated is the whole sense of the military and how pervasive in the culture it was at that time. There was a real militarization and the Jesuits were military-like. I mean that was the way it was presented, you know, the shock troops of the church. It was an elite. It was like the marines and I think that was the way many Jesuits saw themselves, as marines of the church. But it was for the church and so interestingly enough I think it gave us an option to embrace this sort of discipline of the time and at the same time embrace it in a way that felt religiously significant. And for me, Pope John the

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<sup>5</sup> Dorothy Day was a journalist, social activist, and Catholic convert who organized and established the Catholic Worker movement in the 1930s. See: <http://www.catholicworker.org/dorothyday/>

<sup>6</sup> The Hungarian Revolution of 1956, October 23 to November 10, was a nation wide revolt against Soviet control. It was brutally suppressed by the Soviet military.

23<sup>rd</sup> gave a different face to Catholicism—it's really difficult to appreciate that now. He became Pope and then the atmosphere... *Pacem in terris* was a very important statement.<sup>7</sup> Peace on earth.

**EM:** Vatican II<sup>8</sup> was convened in 1962, the same year you entered the order. Did you have a sense at the time that you were a part of something that was such a major change in the Church?

**JB:** We did, we did. We were only allowed, in my first two years as a Jesuit novice, to watch television twice. One was the opening of the Vatican council. And the only other thing we watched was the report on the assassination of John F. Kennedy. The Vatican council, of course, fed a critical spirit. There was this very rebellious spirit and a sense of dramatic change, dramatic change. And we weren't wrong in that. We were right. There was the feeling of the Earth shaking, that all the old rules didn't hold anymore. In terms of my vocation, you know, I didn't want to be a priest, in the sense that so many think of priests now. I was never an altar boy. I never liked that sort of thing. I wasn't drawn to that. But I was drawn to a deeper relationship with God. In those days there was this dramatic difference between the laity and the priests. If you were serious about God, you entered religious life or became a priest. That's one of the changes in the Vatican council, that lay people have an equal vocation. Well that wasn't in the air back then. There might have been a theology justifying that but it certainly wasn't in the air. The Catholic intellectuals were priests, and they were usually Jesuits. So that was part of the appeal. It wasn't to be on the altar. It was more to be in the world. For me it was the idea that there was a perfection of your life that was capable of being created in religious life that was different from the business of lay people's lives—that was part of the appeal for me, this idea of focusing on my own spiritual development in a way that was not possible otherwise. Now, one of the other dimensions, which is a little more difficult to speak about, was the whole issue of sexuality. I mean, I had a sense of being gay at that time and the options for being gay were so limited. What do you do, as a Catholic? You were forbidden to engage in any sexual activity outside marriage, and marriage was not something that appealed to me. I sort of knew the gay ambiance of New York. It wasn't hard to find. I mean you were stumbling into it all the time. So I think that was a factor for me too. That this was something, this was a healthy way of dealing with an issue that I saw no other options for dealing with, that would enable you to stay a good Catholic. There's a very good film and it caught for me the atmosphere of those days. It's called *Before Stonewall* and it's a study of American life prior to Stonewall and the whole gay liberation movement.<sup>9</sup> What they captured very well in that film is how, after World War II, everyone was talking about liberty, freedom, overcoming fascism, and triumph over totalitarianism, and people came back and said 'well, what about me?' *Laughs*. You know, I want to be free too.

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<sup>7</sup> Papal encyclical of April 11, 1963. Online version available at, [www.vatican.va/holy\\_father/john\\_xxiii/encyclicals/documents/hf\\_j-xxiii\\_enc\\_11041963\\_pacem\\_en.html](http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/john_xxiii/encyclicals/documents/hf_j-xxiii_enc_11041963_pacem_en.html)

<sup>8</sup> The Second Vatican Council (1962-1965).

<sup>9</sup> *Before Stonewall*, 1984, directed by Greta Schiller and Robert Rosenberg.

**EM:** Intellectually and in terms of your faith, in trying to deepen your relationship to God and trying to live an intellectual life, how did you negotiate the position of the Catholic Church on sexuality? How could the Church be a place open in a sense to you and yet promoting a view of sexuality so antithetical to you?

**JB:** Yes, well it was difficult. I felt sort of torn between two worlds there. I knew gay people who were openly gay before entering the Jesuits, which most people did not know. I remember, I still remember vividly, sitting on this bench with some of the other novices—we might have been three years in at that point—and saying, “you know, we should really do something for...” we used to say, “homosexual people. This is really terrible the way the church treats them.” They were shocked, “what do you mean, what do you mean?” I was always making remarks like that. But I had to be careful because in those days, even though I wasn’t thinking this way, in those days it was so far beyond the horizon, that somebody would be advocating homosexual activity. That was a no-no. You can imagine the seminary structure. But, any sexual activity outside of marriage was a sin. So, you really didn’t feel that different from heterosexual people in that. Well, at least this was the sense you had. So, you did not deal with that except in an unhealthy way of not dealing with it. Well, what eventually happened with me, I did go to a psychiatrist, when I was twenty. They sent me. To be sent to a psychiatrist in those days was already a danger signal. So, I was sent to a psychiatrist. Well, it was sort of a mutual agreement. I went down to this doctor in New York and it turns out that many people were going to the psychiatrist, but I didn’t know that, we didn’t know it. Everything was kept secret that way. But it got me out of the seminary, you know, one day a month or something like that. I went down to New York and enjoyed walking around Greenwich village. His office was in the village. *Laughs.* I thought, “this is not the place to send me!” But I remember dealing with him and coming to the point where I had to make a choice. He had told me—and this probably wasn’t that good on his part as a psychiatrist—he said that priests he had dealt with always said, “if you ever meet somebody here who is a young man who is homosexual, tell him to leave. It’s too difficult to stay.” I remember walking around the village and I went into this church. It was the NYU Catholic chapel. I spent some time in that chapel and I sort of made the decision to stay as a Jesuit, because I felt a call that this was the way life God wished for me. And, whenever I was in New York, if I was in that area, I would always drop by that chapel. That’s where I had my first mass. People asked, “why do you want to have your first mass here?” And I said, “oh it’s important for me.” But I never told them why it was important. Then, about two years ago, I was in that general area again—I was going to stop in, I always had my custom to stop in that chapel—and it was a hole in the ground. They had torn it down. *Laughs.*

**EM:** In your work you compare the Nazi discourse on the Jews to their discourse on the Jesuits and, more controversially for some, their discourse on gay people. What links Jesuits, Jews, and gay people together in Nazi discourse? What have you learned and why is it important? For example: why are specific characteristics that are identified as Jewish, as well as Jesuit,

perceived to be so dangerous; or rather how do certain characterizations of people function so effectively as part of the Nazi propaganda apparatus?

**JB:** Well, I think the key is that they're both anti-racist in that the Jesuits and the Jews are perceived as internationalists. They have no homes. That's why we don't have monasteries. Right from the beginning the assistant to Ignatius said that the Jesuit's home is the world.<sup>10</sup> I think that's true of the Jew too. Now at different points in our history, of course, nationalism played out. So, the Italians at one point thought the Spanish Jesuits were far too powerful and they wanted to suppress them and they did. And then the French Jesuits had a lot of influence. So there were all of these nationalisms, but they were largely being played off by the monarchs of Europe against one another. But there is that sensibility that's very international and the Nazis appreciated that. But there's also the demonization of Jesuits because of the influence of Jesuits on the monarchs—always behind the scenes, always operating but never coming forward. That was true of the Jesuits and the Jews together. There's a document against the Jesuits from the 17<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>11</sup> That's the partial source of the "Protocols of the Elders of Zion."<sup>12</sup> When the Protocols of Zion were being written up the categories of anti-Jesuitism were perfect. They just took them right over. So, there's an interesting history there that hasn't been really thematized as it should, but I am working on an essay on that that will be published in a future issue of a new journal, *The Journal of Jesuit Studies*.

**EM:** In, "Philosophizing after the Holocaust," you write: "An analysis of Jewish and gay experience together leads to a direct consideration of the sexual and erotic dimensions of fascism. In my work, I have tried to sketch how a Christian, particularly Catholic, experience of sexuality and a style of moral formation that was its issue might have contributed to the popular appeal of National Socialism to the identification of two groups of its enemies, as well as to the savagery of its violence."<sup>13</sup> What is this experience of sexuality, where does it come from, and how does it come to serve fascism?

**JB:** Yes. Well of course one of the things I've found so helpful in approaching this vast documentation of Catholics talking about sexuality during this period are Foucault's categories. You get away from just the prohibitions and you are looking at what they are actually saying. And it's a mentality that's really quite striking when you think of it. The only philosophical

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<sup>10</sup> Jerome Nadal (1507-1580).

<sup>11</sup> "The *Monita Secreta*" or "The Private Directives of the Society of Jesus" was published anonymously in Poland in 1615.

<sup>12</sup> "Protocols of the Elders of Zion" was a document first published in Russia in 1903 as an anti-Semitic hoax, describing a Jewish plan for world domination. Hitler and the Nazi regime publicized this material as truth in Germany in order to further enflame antisemitic attitudes and provide justification for persecution of Jewish people. For connections between "The *Monita Secreta*" and "The Protocols of the Elders of Zion," see Bernauer, "From European Anti-Jesuitism to German Anti-Jewishness: A Tale of Two Texts," A Presentation at the Conference "Honoring Stanislaw Musial," Jagiellonian University, Krakow, Poland (March 5, 2009).

<sup>13</sup> James Bernauer, "Philosophizing After the Holocaust," in Francis X. Clooney (ed.), *Jesuit Post-Modern: Scholarship, Vocation, and Identity in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century* (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books. 2006), 117.

position I think I embrace as my own is personalism. Too much of Catholic discussions take such an impersonal mode of relating. It's an impersonal way of relating to sexuality. Actually, some of the prohibitions and interdictions in the Catholic culture about sexuality make good sense. They actually are personalist. But they are often being put forward in an impersonal way and not connected to the personal. I think that often undermines the whole presentation of sexuality in Catholicism. A version of natural law is bought into to such an extent that a description of personal matters is articulated in an impersonal mode. And Christian moralists frequently don't understand why some people react strongly when they are spoken of as intrinsically disordered. They don't understand why gay people take such exception to that. *Laughs.*

**EM:** I'm interested in the role of Catholic or Christian practices and discourses on sexuality, the experience of sexuality and the moral formation that went with that—the role this played in making way so to speak for Nazism.

**JB:** In terms of an interpretation of sexuality and its place in Nazism, there's a lot more done now. Looking through the way so many Catholic leaders enunciated—that was my focus—the Catholic teaching in Germany prior to and during the Second World War, all too regularly there's this demonization of sexuality again. The Nazis, in their propaganda, used it very cleverly to draw the young people away from traditional Catholic culture by pointing out that it is all this negation, negativity. It doesn't celebrate. Well, the Nazis were celebrating the body. There was this whole body culture in early 20<sup>th</sup> century in Germany and the church turned against it. Why? In some ways it was more of a reflection of traditional incarnation themes than the teaching the Church stressed. Meanwhile you have this unbelievable military force being assembled, a totalitarian system that they seemed very unaware of. And it was also a sacramental theology at work in the Catholic Church's thinking. Their major obligation was providing sacraments that were essential to eternal life, not confronting the Nazis. So they had to keep the churches open, and that was their strategy. Now our theology has changed, or at least it has changed for many people. There is much more respect for heroic moral resistance, even if one doesn't have access to the sacraments. But that wasn't the conviction in Germany in the thirties and forties. But the demeaning of the bodily, and of sexuality and eroticism in general, it's so general in the spiritual literature in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Of course, German Jews are connected to much of it. For example, the openness of cinema. Even though the Jews are significant forces in German cinema, they are not more so than gentiles. But the Nazis always portrayed this as a Jewish culture because it was coming out of Berlin. But Berlin was not just Jewish culture. The whole issue of German, Berlin culture of the 1920s has to be recovered. I offered a course on Weimar culture and I called it "The Search for Spirituality" and I think there's a lot to that. I mean you had people like Buber, you had some Christian theologians doing the same sort of thing. They were looking for a more personalist mode and for Buber, he thought he was reflecting the Bible. That's what the Bible announces, the personal relationship with God and the people of Israel. And, instead this relationship was regularly reduced to a mechanical following, to obedience. There's a real need for a history of obedience in Christianity.

**EM:** Did Foucault's thought give you some insight into the fundamental role of obedience within pastoral power and how that might have contributed to the acceptance of National Socialism in some respects?

**JB:** Well, we could focus on the role of confession. It's very interesting: originally it was spiritual direction. It was a very elite type of exchange. Then that became standardized in terms of this confessional practice, which stressed the sinful. That's what people were going to confession for. They weren't going to confess their heroic virtues. They were going to confess their sins. So in these confession manuals, you have the idea that every Catholic has to go to confession at least one a year. And many used to do it much more regularly. In fact, some thought the idea was to go to confession every day. Instead of being a discernment of spirits, instead of some sort of education to how your spirit was being moved in terms of consolations/desolations, confession became more about asking what sins do you commit. It set up a very negative attitude with respect to oneself and the greatest register was in terms of sexuality. So you had all sorts of sins that could be spoken of about sexuality with a great nuance and these confessional manuals educated the priests about what they should be asking in the confessional. Nazism came along and said, well, let's celebrate the body—of course, their project was to develop the military body. The Nazis were reordering society to produce a very skilled military. So you have this discourse that enters into Nazism very easily and the gays become a target because they are useless. They are not producing children. They provide communities among themselves. That's what the Nazis did not want. The Nazis didn't want Catholic youth groups either. They disbanded those youth groups. So, the gays had an independent existence. Of course they were often Berliners—they were connected to Berlin. So they became a target. I mean if you bring up any of these relationships to gay culture, still there's a lot of visceral reaction. And, I'm not sure we understand why. I'm much more willing to say I don't understand why. I don't think we have answers to these questions. And, it suggests that we live with a lot of unknowing in our lives and even things we consider most intimate about ourselves.

**EM:** You write, "what has to be faced though is that the beginning of the Hitler regime coincided with a passionate desire among the German people for a spiritual renewal, indeed for a politics of spirit, which National Socialism attempted to define. Perhaps that crises' most important element was how was one to relate to oneself. How one might affirm oneself as spiritually worthwhile."<sup>14</sup> Why was there such a desire for spiritual renewal, where was the Church in this, and how did Nazism attempt to fill that void?

**JB:** Yes. I do think that the greatest weakness of Christianity faced with Nazism was its frequent dualism. And maybe this is the sickness of Western culture. In a way dualism was what the Nazis spoke against. Levinas has that interesting essay, which he did not want included in his collected works, and is not being included in his collective works. But he wrote

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<sup>14</sup> Bernauer, "Philosophizing After the Holocaust," 118.

it in something like 1934, “The Philosophy of Hitlerism.”<sup>15</sup> And, he says in it that what Nazism represented was overcoming dualism, that is the basic idea. I don’t want to cite Levinas, not having read the essay for a very long time. The Nazis were setting up this alienation that they wanted to overcome. A different type of alienation than what Marxism critiqued. But I think I can understand why Hannah Ardent focused on alienation; in German culture it was there. I mean you have Nietzsche of course. So, this overcoming of dualism became central. Now, what Levinas says is that, as a matter of fact, they denied spirit in the end. They weren’t overcoming it, they were choosing one side; they were choosing the bodily over against the spiritual. But he didn’t want that included in his collective works and the justification he gave for it was he thought he gave too much intellectual depth to Hitlerism. But, there was for many people that intellectual depth, or at least, they imagined it was there. I mean, that’s why so many of the philosophers and theologians thought this is a great movement. Now in part it was imagination, they read into what they wanted to. But one of the things I’m struck by in the archive work I’ve done is, people say, “why didn’t Christianity stand up to Nazism” and so on and so forth. It’s a legitimate question, but what they have to appreciate is how weak Christianity had become. And that’s what normally is not seen, because the façade looks so strong. One of the things that is appealing about Foucault is he undercuts the normal institutional divide that we make—Christianity as opposed to secularism. “Christianization in depth” is a way of describing that. But what he’s talking about also is how Christianity gets co-opted. It doesn’t know its own sources. For instance, in his book on ethics Mark Jordan says Christianity got into the pattern of an obligatory answer to every question.<sup>16</sup> So its moralists pronounce on everything. And, they think that’s good; there’s no admission of ignorance.

**EM:** One of the real questions that Foucault addresses is the connection between spirituality and sexuality. I don’t think he answers exactly the question that you are dealing with here but he has something to say about it. At least by charting the way in which in the Christian experience of the pastorate sexuality becomes so deeply engrained in our need to know the truth about who we are and to renounce that truth. Sexuality comes to be the central operator there. Do you think Foucault had an answer to the question of, “why sexuality?”

**JB:** Well, I expect he didn’t have any. I’m not even sure he could conceive of what it might be. I’ve thought about this for a while: how did Catholicism often get into this dead end where it was seen as being the opponent of sexuality? Why does the Renaissance have primarily a bad connotation for Catholics? I mean Catholics were the architects of it. That’s what I liked about John O’Malley’s book on preaching at the papal court.<sup>17</sup> It was on incarnation and its goodness. It was their conviction on incarnation that made these people capable of taking the world seriously, you know, building great artistic monuments and celebrating human life and...

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<sup>15</sup> Emmanuel Levinas, “Reflections on the Philosophy of Hitlerism,” translated by Seán Hand, *Critical Inquiry*, Vol. 17 (Chicago, IL: Chicago University Press, 1990), 63–71.

<sup>16</sup> Mark Jordan, *The Ethics of Sex* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2002).

<sup>17</sup> John O-Malley, *Praise and Blame in Renaissance Rome* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1979).



**EM:** And the human body.

**JB:** And the human body and that's of course why the Jesuits are a Renaissance group. It's that sort of worldliness that has frequently boomeranged on us and led us to be regarded as too worldly. But you sort of say, "what's the alternative?" *Laughs.* It's not the only path of Christianity. But increasingly the path became far too focused on obedience. And obedience without real learning about how these forces came together to abate sexuality. We're going to be living in some ignorance. That's where Hannah Arendt is right in her analysis of the German elites. They were not attached to the experience of searching for the truth. They had the truth. And this is what Sartre says in *Anti-Semite and Jew*. The anti-Semite is somebody who never has to struggle for the truth. He's got the answer. And I think the same thing is true in what Arendt is saying about people attached to codes of ethics. You don't have to struggle through the moral quandaries to really get a sense of what is ethical. You've got the answer. So that's what is really remarkable in the United States in terms of same-sex marriages. I mean, who would have guessed twenty years ago that would be happening. That the president of the United States would be for it; and, he thinks it won't hurt him politically; it's an amazing transformation. But, you wouldn't get that sense of that transformation going around listening to the statements of ecclesiastic authorities...

**EM:** So you spoke of the possibility of a Christian experience of sexuality that would be a really helpful and healthy experience. Could you say what you mean by that?

**JB:** Well, one thing, you would have to overcome is the overemphasis on sin when dealing with sexuality. It has been so tied up with that sin discourse. Even in terms of the biblical myths, why does sin enter the world? I mean, how is Eve portrayed? And so often the depiction of women in the religious sources is very negative—Mary is the greatest exception, you know, she stands out. So you'd have to overcome the discourse of sinfulness, which I think people are overcoming. For example, confession is no longer the practice that it once was. William James has this interesting remark in the *Varieties of Religious Experience* that he was surprised that Protestantism gave up confession because it created such solace for people and now a hundred years later Catholicism gave it up too. People are less and less inclined to go to confession. So, it seems to me that the Catholic culture is dealing with that discourse of sinfulness by sort of walking away from it. That is inadequate as well. Now, whether progressive Christianity has found a positive side is something else and that's where authority figures intervene. For example, the most recent case, of Margret Farley writing that book, *Just Love*, she's taking a viewpoint of issues of justice in dealing with sexuality.<sup>18</sup> But again, that provoked such a strong controversy. The positive side is pleasure—there was an ex-Jesuit who wound up teaching at Brown, John Giles Milhaven,<sup>19</sup> and he said, way back in the late 1960s, early 1970s, that Christianity needs a theory of Hedonism. At the time it struck me as weird, you know, but it makes a lot of sense. We don't have an appreciation for pleasure, even the

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<sup>18</sup> Margaret A. Farley, *Just Love* (New York: Continuum International Publishing Group, 2006).

<sup>19</sup> John Giles, *Milhaven – In defense of Christian hedonism*, 1972.

pleasures that people derive from musical performance. It's always didactic, there's a didacticism in religious thinking about these things. One of the things I liked about Steinberg's book on *The Sexuality of Christ in Renaissance Art and Modern Oblivion*<sup>20</sup> is his claim that the painters, the artists, were ahead of where the theologians were. They were depicting Christ in a fully incarnational form in a way that theology didn't seem to justify. And I would say that John Paul II in terms of dealing with the Jewish people was ahead of where theology was, which emphasized Christianity's supersession of Judaism.

**EM:** Well my question is: do you see something in Catholic teaching, ministry, or practices that would provide a foundation for what you're talking about, a pastoral relation that isn't grounded in the experience of sin and that does give its proper place to pleasure?

**JB:** I think it's the artistic tradition. It is one of the things that draw people to Catholicism. There was an interesting discussion a number of years ago between Avery Dulles,<sup>21</sup> who became Cardinal Dulles, and Dave Hollenbach.<sup>22</sup> Dave was talking about the importance of social justice issues and how that concern draws many people to Catholicism and makes Catholicism very respectable for them. But Avery said, "well, you know, if you read the memoirs of converts, it's the aesthetics of Catholicism that draws so many people." I don't think it has to be an either/or. There are different types of people. But I do think that the aesthetics is one way of getting into the notion of pleasure. The other way is actually to speak of married people in a way that would be really different. So, you know, Foucault was doing the life of infamous men, what we need is probably a life of celebratory marriages. How do couples hold together and flourish? We have very little of that in our culture.

**EM:** Do you think that Foucault's analysis of what he calls spirituality might contribute something to this discussion? I'm talking about what he says in *The Hermeneutics of the Subject*, when he presents spirituality in terms of those practices that one performs in order to transform oneself in such a way as to become open to an experience of the truth. So it's a change in the relationship to the self and a change in the relationship to the truth. And certainly in those lectures that followed, *The Government of the Self and Others* and *The Courage of the Truth*, spirituality, or care of the self, involved a truthful relationship to another. I wonder if that notion of spirituality might be close to what you are talking about in terms of the personal.

**JB:** Yes, I think you're right. If you have these practices serve the development of one's personal relationships. That's one of his major emphases at the end of his life, right? Friendship. I mean, how do we re-think friendship and re-experience friendship. It seems to me that it

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<sup>20</sup> Leo Stienberg, *The Sexuality of Christ in Renaissance Art and Modern Oblivion* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1983).

<sup>21</sup> Avery Dulles, Jesuit and Cardinal, was Laurence J. McGinley Professor of Religion and Society at Fordham University.

<sup>22</sup> David Hollenbach, Professor of Theology at Boston College and University Chair in Human Rights and International Justice. He is the Director of the Center for Human Rights and International Justice at Boston College.

wasn't just a gay issue, which is what some people thought it was, but it is a human issue. That's why I find Macmurray a compatible thinker with Foucault, even though he's much more directly personalist.<sup>23</sup> But he has that line, 'All thought is for the sake of action and all action is for the sake of friendship.' I think that's a great motto.

**EM:** I'm guessing that many Foucault scholars, readers of Foucault, would be surprised to hear your emphasis on the personal given Foucault's pronouncements on the death of man, his attempt to dissolve subjectivity, to get away from the subject from being so essential. Do you see a difference between, on the one hand, the "subject" and, on the other, the "person"?

**JB:** Oh, I think so. I think for Foucault that the whole issue of humanism and "man," constructed through the human sciences in the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> century, I mean, that's the objectivized. That's precisely the impersonal. It seems to be dealing with the human person but it's not, it's dealing with this predictable reality, who defines him or herself in terms of these human sciences. So, you don't have a human person defining him or herself in terms of his or her spiritual experiences, or friendship experiences, or ethical commitments. And that was the thing: we're put on these alien calendars of labor, life, and, language, what does that have to do with us? I think Foucault comes increasingly to the personal. There's a personal dimension to Foucault that made it possible for him to take a distance from the "human being." Recall that great line, "the face drawn in the sand at the edge of the sea;" the rhetorical lines, 'I write in order to have no face.' He had the sense of these identities being placed upon you and you had to escape if you were going to live personally. And I think that's true. For example, you have to escape your national identity on some level, in order to be a moral being, to take other people and other nations into account as seriously as you take your own national group into account. I doubt Foucault would have described himself as a personalist, but in reality I think that's what he was doing. At least he could be interpreted in this way. It depends on where you stop reading Foucault. As you know, so many people haven't gotten into the late work. So they think of him as this dark figure, the death of man, while he was actually doing the same thing to "man" that Nietzsche did to God. This takes on a different resonance in light of the late works.

**EM:** When your book came out, it was one of the first comprehensive studies of Foucault's thought, whereas today there are several such studies. And there's been some consensus about how to understand the development of Foucault's thought. But your book doesn't conform to that generally accepted periodization of Foucault's work or the focus on his methodologies. You have different categories, and I wonder if you could talk a little bit about those categories: cathartic thinking, dissonant thinking, dissident thinking, and ecstatic thinking. How did you come to those categories, what do they mean to you?

**JB:** Yes, well, one of the things you make me aware of is, first of all, it's not an either-or. There are so many different patterns you can impose upon any writer. Let alone one as versatile and

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<sup>23</sup> John Macmurray, *The Form of the Personal* (two volumes) (New York: Humanity Books, 1957, 1961).

wide in his interests as Foucault was. So, I don't think it's an either/or, that one way is superior to the other. Another element your question makes me aware of is how lucky I was that I got into doing this before there was a pattern and so the only thing I can plead for my categories is that I studied the texts very carefully and I tried to be faithful to what I thought was going on in the text. So each of those categories comes out of a fundamental Foucaudian mood I picked up. I like to think of it as a personalist examination of his thought—how this person evolved?—not in terms of a mature intellectual project, but in terms of fundamental moods about what he was doing. The major source for my self-confidence about how I was understanding Foucault came with the realization that his critics at the time (in the nineteen-seventies) were not very accurate about how he had developed, especially in his earliest stage. The interpreters had not appreciated that the text Foucault wrote in 1954 (“Mental Illness and Personality”) was not the same book that was published in 1962 (“Mental Illness and Psychology.”) The change of title reflected the fact that his 1961 thesis on the history of madness had overturned his viewpoints of 1954 but this had gone unnoticed by his commentators. I realized that if the 1954 and 1962 texts were the same, well then there was no need for and no consequence from his historical investigations of madness. Such investigation would have been a phony exercise. And so I went to the Bibliotheque Nationale in the fall of 1978 and asked for the 1954 text and, of course, I discovered that it was radically different from the text published in 1962 and that had been regarded and identified as a mere re-issue of the 1954 work. Foucault had been transformed by his work in the historical archives of madness and mental illness. The fruit of that discovery made me skeptical of the quality of scholarly work on Foucault and that was a terrific impetus to go by my own lights in working through Foucault's texts. The second thing in responding to your question is that there is a unity in Foucault's thought and it's the ethical. Foucault is a profoundly ethical being. And, that's what I tapped into. He's an intellectual yes, and that is what most of those projects are. And maybe you could redefine the intellectualism in terms of the fundamental ethical focus. But I think that in terms of dissident thinking that Foucault was looking at experience through an ethical concern. He always had that sense of what words do, what statements do, and how authorities invest some of those statements with the power and others not. So it's an ethical sensibility I think he always had. It's strange that he's usually interpreted in the opposite way, you know, if you think of 'the death of man' and so on. But, it's a very ethical sensibility.

**EM:** So, your categories reflect, then, your appreciation of his thought in terms of the evolution, maybe that's not the right word, but the transformation of the individual thinking, the person thinking.

**JB:** Yes, 'transformation' is probable the better term. In light of the later work, it's probably a very good term. I think what I was claiming and working through was that Foucault was affected by the research he did. It transformed the way he approached issues. So you did have development in Foucault. And you can, you know, freeze that development into other categories that are probably just as good. But I think these are more personalist categories and I think I could only have done it this way, because there wasn't a secondary criticism suggesting another way of putting it. And the ecstatic dimension—I mean everyone talks about Fou-

cault at the end, you know, the sense of serenity he exhibited. He wasn't dealing with the prison or all the issues with confinement and power; he was dealing with something else. He was dealing with practices of freedom. He had grown through these intellectual practices, and it's his growth that's of interest as a thinker.

**EM:** Well how do you see the value or usefulness of these categories? I mean, with the other widely known or accepted paradigm that's applied these days to Foucault's thought—you can see the value or usefulness of that, in terms of scholarship for instance. The methodological approach, the way you can define a field of objects. This gives researchers and scholars lots of tools to use, lots of insights into a specific historical period that one can use. But your categories work differently from that. You know, you walk away from an understanding of Cathartic thinking, dissonant thinking, dissident thinking, ecstatic thinking. Those categories do not exactly look like tools that you can use in the same way that genealogy seems to be a research tool.

**JB:** Yes. That's a great question. I think my response to it would be that what's really involved in this type of categorization is personal appropriation. And it may be more fundamental than the projects that your mind eventually is led to. Some of those projects are things that will be by chance. You're invited to do this, or this is where your study group is, but if you haven't appropriated yourself as a thinker, you're never going to be able to ask innovative questions; and, you must understand where you yourself are coming from, what your commitment is. Not that I want to universalize these, but we probably all have our Cathartic periods—we might have that experience in reading Foucault, as in my case with *The History of Madness*—we might have a study that we do that really throws everything off. That was always where Foucault was so interesting, where he displaced issues. Maybe we have to think of those displacements in terms of our own relationship to ourselves and ask what enabled Foucault to do that in terms of issues such as sexuality, the way he turns around the oppression question for example. Where does that capability come from?

**EM:** Well I think this also leads back to the question about the personal and the collective versus the institutional and the abstract. I mean this is a question I always wonder about given my understanding of Foucault. Is there a place in, or to what extent is there a place in our institutions of higher learning for active personal appropriation or self-transformation? These institutions are built around scholarly productivity, and to me when I look at what you did in your book and I look at what I think Foucault is doing, I think it's a real challenge to the model of intellectual life, and education, that's so deeply engrained in these institutions.

**JB:** I agree. I totally agree with you on that. Individuals can do this kind of work, but the power of major institutions for determining the academic culture is just shocking. A few major universities determine, you know, what philosophy is going to be done or at least what is going to be valued. A few major journals determine what's going to be produced. We are in need of a type of argument against the hegemony of these institutions that isn't being made in a way we should. And, it's unfortunate that one of the groups that could do this and has done

it traditionally would be the Catholic Colleges. But all too often what is defining the Catholic Colleges now are authority structures. We do have programs like 'Pulse'<sup>24</sup>—and Foucault was very interested in its curriculum when we spoke about it—and we can do a different type of education. But yes, I think your point is well taken that we're talking about providing education for people who are interested in self-transformation. When I teach students I always tell them I love the university as an institution because it's one of the few that's going to be concerned about your growth. Other institutions will see you in terms of what they can do with you and how you can serve their purposes. But you should have at a university the experience that the only thing they are interested in is your growth. Now, whether the students get that today...

**EM:** You've often in the past expressed some surprise about the continuing vitality of scholarship on Foucault. In fact it seems to have picked up in some ways obviously with the lectures being published. I wonder if you're still surprised by the continuing interest in and work on Foucault. Do you have some sense of where Foucault scholarship might go, what directions look promising, or what you might like to see happen with Foucault's thought?

**JB:** Yes. I'm not as surprised as I once was and part of the reason is, I've just run across too many people who had similar experiences as I did reading Foucault's *History of Madness*. You sort of say, this is an intriguing mind. This guy is not saying what you already know. I don't know if you ever read the review by the prisoner of *Discipline and Punish*—this was a fellow in prison and he says everything in prison teaches you to look down on yourself and to not improve yourself. And then he read Foucault and he said finally he was reading somebody who was encouraging his growth. And then, I think of the Ladelle McWhorter book. What's the name of that?

**EM:** *Bodies and Pleasures*.<sup>25</sup>

**JB:** And she opens it with this sort of personal account of great distress in her life. And she picked up Foucault, she gives an exact date, month, day, and year. She picked up Volume 1 of *The History of Sexuality* and she was totally changed by this book. To me that's not one of his great books. For me, it's not one of his books that I would have thought could really transform you. But for her it was. And she said, she finally appreciated a book written from a queer perspective. But Edward Said says something similar. He says, everyone remembers the first time they picked up a Foucault text because it was sort of this electricity that shot off. And I think that's true. People remember picking Foucault and reading if they continue to

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<sup>24</sup> The Pulse Program, offered at Boston College, teaches students about social justice by putting them in direct contact with marginalized groups and social change organizations in society. In addition to volunteering in placed field work, the program also consists of a year-long philosophy and theology course, Persons and Social Responsibility, that includes discussions and reflections (<http://www.bc.edu/content/bc/schools/cas/pulse/about.html>).

<sup>25</sup> Ladelle McWhorter, *Bodies and Pleasures: Foucault and the Politics of Sexual Normalization* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1999).

read him. So I think I'm less surprised. No one has supplanted him yet. Derrida did not, except for maybe scholars. That capacity to pick up a text and sort of be ignited, that's still a strength in Foucault's books. In terms of where the field should go: I feel that the discarded original *History of Sexuality* project is still crucial for understanding how we became who we became. I think that those categories of analysis, the volumes he imagined for that series are still very worth doing. I put much of my own work in the context of that last part of Volume 1 on races and populations. In *Discipline and Punish* Foucault says that the concept of the human person is measured on two registers. The Cartesian/philosophical register but also the military register. I was struck, running across years ago just this casual fact that Franklin Roosevelt at the height of the Second World War had 10 and a half million soldiers under him. The Russians had even more. No one had ever imagined anyone having power over a force like that. But we did it. We brought this thing together—it started with the French revolution and the American Civil War, but most of us don't know that history. How did this capacity for mass mobilization develop, so that you could really imagine a situation like all out nuclear war? You know, there's an argument that the Romans did not develop all the technology they were capable of because it affronted their sense of humanity. Well, the question that raised for me would be: is there anything that affronts our sense of humanity now? Is the sense of ourselves so instrumentalized, so militarized? So, I think that's one of the big areas of the future—the militarization of our culture and how to understand it as an intellectual practice too.

**EM:** Thanks, Jim.

**JB:** Thank you. Thank you very much.

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