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REVIEW

Philippe Chevalier, *Michel Foucault et le christianisme* (Lyon: ENS Éditions, 2011), ISBN: 978-2-84788-325-1

In 1980, an American Philosophy and Theology student named James Bernauer organized a private meeting between Foucault and some fellow theologians. While it is only a guess what Foucault may have learned from that meeting, it proved to be influential for Bernauer, who went on to author and inspire a number of studies arguing for the relevance of Foucault for contemporary Christian theology.

Phillip Chevalier's book follows this tradition, but has the advantage of unprecedented access to still unpublished materials from Foucault's archive, including some which may never be released for general publications. He is also a careful reader, has a superb knowledge of Foucault's work, and is familiar with the scholarship of early Christianity and with Catholic theology. All of which makes this book important for those interested in the in the question of Foucault and Christian theology, as well as for anybody interested in Foucault's late teachings.

Chevalier characterizes Foucault's approach to Christianity as a series of trials and errors he compares to the many emendations and revisions of a manuscript, rather than the progressive refinement of an initial notion (230), an image that conveys Chevalier's conviction that there is unity beneath the different ways in which Foucault's thought crosses Christianity.

While Chevalier's does not organize his book chronologically, it may be useful to enumerate the different approaches to Christianity that Chevalier's finds in Foucault's work. There is (1) a Nietzschean inspired discourse in the period immediately after *Madness and Civilization* where Christianity functions as the other of modernity (231-290); (2) a period extending from 1966-1976 where Foucault does not seem to be interested in Christianity as a historical totality, but only in specific aspects (Lectures from 1974-1975); (3) Christianity as pastoral Governmentality, where Christianity seems mainly to be conceived as the matrix where the modern techniques of social regulation and control were developed and refined (Lectures from 1976-1978); (4) a period, which covers 1979-1984, in which Foucault slowly develops his original understanding of Christianity as a 'precarious relationship to truth.' (291-348)

Chevalier is interested in Christianity as a unified body of beliefs, practices, and institutions with a multi-secular history. Such a perspective seems to be *prima facie* foreign to Foucault's "project of an historiography that wants to remain oriented to local analysis, to carve out of the archive series of discourses or practices that cross themselves only strategically." (56, my translation) This tension between author and interpreter explains the somewhat complex organization of the book into three parts. The first, dealing with the methodological problem

(Archaeology versus Christianity as an historical entity), the second dealing with Foucault at work interpreting the Church Fathers, and finally the third, where Chevalier retraces the history of Foucault's interpretation of Christianity. This organization explains some overlaps and repetitions, which the author believes are unavoidable if we want to preserve both the unity of Foucault's work and of Christianity.

Chevalier devotes the first of the three parts of his book to the discussion of the apparent inconsistency between Foucault's stated methodological principles and the fact that Christianity reappears systemically in his thought. Archaeology presupposes that there is no significant unity in the historical object pre-existing the operation, which carves it from the archive. But, in order to understand the role of something like Christianity in the constitution of the Western subject, we need at least to confer to Christianity some sort of 'significant unity.' (14) Part One, chapter II, develops the main thread of Chevalier's argument. Chevalier disapproves of Foucault's analysis of Christianity in terms of pastoral governmentality, which he characterizes as 'a univocal reading that cuts brutally in the historical action' (*le vif de l'histoire*). (72) He advances the hypothesis that Foucault's analysis was influenced by his increasingly negative appreciation of Marxism and by his interest in the work of the Soviet bloc dissidents during that period. Chevalier decries Foucault's tendency to present every aspect from Christianity that does not fit into the totalitarian-pastoral approach as merely exterior to its reality. (79) He devotes a whole section to show that mysticism, one of the 'counter-conducts' presented by Foucault in *Security, Territory and Population* is not in fact exterior to ecclesiastical power but has a complex relationship with it. (85-91) In any case, Chevalier concludes that Foucault himself was dissatisfied with his analysis of 'counter-conducts' in the 1978-79 Lectures, as he would return to the same subject from a different angle in the 1979-1980 Lectures.

In the 1980 Lectures, Christianity is a 'regime of truth' (*regime de vérité*), an approach that Chevalier judges more favorably. He retraces the development of this notion (91-103), which he agrees is used rarely by Foucault, and defines it as 'the activity by which a subject constitutes himself as having to establish a certain relationship to a given truth' (97), or in other words, the 'subjective conditions' of truth (99), conditions that for Chevalier mean 'the way in which subjectivity is determined by truth.' (108) While Chevalier certainly is successful in establishing that Foucault is interested in the relationship between Subjectivity and Truth, his reading does not provide, in my view, enough evidence to exclude a sociological reading of this relationship. Also, Foucault does not provide a typology of *Regimes de vérité* that will show other forms of relationship to truth and the specificity of Christianity.

The second part of the book explores Foucault's handling of the Church Fathers. Starting with his 1980 lectures in the College de France, Foucault 'integrates for the first time in his lectures the textual commentary.' (115) We have limited and mostly indirect information about Foucault's research methodology. Chevalier's study of how Foucault approached the Church Fathers is an important contribution to understanding this issue. According to Chevalier, in the 1980s Lectures Foucault's approach to the texts changes significantly. Where in previous years the texts seem to have been chosen only to exemplify the thesis being developed, he now develops his argument on the basis of a close reading of the text, which includes the mannerisms of the scholar: quotes in Greek and Latin, substitution of his own translations

to the existing ones, etc. Furthermore, the text is considered in its autonomy and originality. (170) In his view, this shows a change in Foucault's approach to the problem of Christianity.

The third and last part of the book claims that Foucault interprets Christianity as a 'middle way'. In order to arrive to that conclusion, Chevalier proposes to discuss two different groups of writings: (1) the studies dealing with madness and literature (1964-1966); and (2) the lectures in the College de France starting in 1979-1980 and until Foucault's final lecture cycle in 1984. Chevalier claims that in the first group of writings, Foucault addresses Christianity as a unified object (290), albeit as a counter-image of Modernity, in a fashion heavily inspired, directly and indirectly, by Nietzsche. After 1966, Christianity ceases to be a self-standing object of historical analysis, until the ethical turn, which is anticipated in the 79-80 lectures. Foucault's main insight into the history of Christianity seems to be the thesis that 'Christianity is a religion of salvation in the imperfection' (Lecture of March 19, 1980, quoted by Chevalier. (326, my translation) This understanding of Christianity may bear the traces of an early encounter with Kierkegaard, which Foucault studied under Hyppolite and Wahl. (331)

The book ends with an Appendix entitled "Possibility of completing a strategic history of Christianity" where Chevalier suggest lines of inquiry that Foucault did not pursue, i.e. Christianity as knowledge (dogma) and as power. Of the two, he only developed the potential application of Foucault's ideas to the constitution of the Christian canon.

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