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FOUCAULT ON CONTINUITY: THE POSTMODERN CHALLENGE TO TRADITION

James M. Byrne

The work of Michel Foucault poses a challenge to all thinking which situates itself in the context of a tradition. This article outlines this challenge by reference to Foucault's views on the continuity/discontinuity problem in history. When Foucault's own position is clarified in relation to a position of absolute discontinuity it can be seen to offer possibilities for theological thinking. The article concludes with some suggestions on the contributions which Foucault's notion of history and tradition can offer to theology on the formal levels of methodology, hermeneutics, discourse and the body.

Postmodernism has something of the character of the Yeti about it: spoken of by many, glimpsed by a few, but it is difficult to find anyone willing to give an exact description of the creature. The end of metaphysics, the death of God, the disappearance of the author, the crisis of reason, the dissipation of metanarratives and many other theories (which, their adherents often claim, are not theories in the real sense but mere sites for discourse) have been presented as marking the definitive demise of the modern. Descartes, Kant, epistemology, ontology, meaning, the signified, and the subject are 'out'; Nietzsche, Derrida, discourse, the text, the trope, the signifier, and grammar are 'in'. If the logic of the term 'postmodern' is indeed problematic, something seems to be happening, even if those who claim to make it happen are reluctant to say what it is. In these pages I will argue that one of the most distinguishing characteristics of the 'postmodern' is an endemic crisis of continuity which disrupts the accepted relationship between an event and a subsequent tradition which gains its identity from the stability of that relationship. The writings of Michel Foucault offer a vivid picture of a postmodern thinking which seeks to divest history of any such overtones of metaphysical continuity. This view of history and tradition presents a radical challenge to the theological commonplace that Christianity lives out of continuity with the event and person of Jesus Christ, and that this relationship is firmly established on the basis of the witness of the first followers of Jesus, codified in Scripture and extended through the preaching and tradition of the church.

1. *The 'Postmodern': A Crisis of Continuity?*

If we accept Martin Heidegger's claim that one of the most distinguishing



marks of the modern is that “man becomes the center and measure of all beings,”¹ then we can read the postmodern deconstruction of ‘man’ as self-consciously anti-humanist. With the birth of the human sciences the human subject increasingly became the object of her own critical reflection, and the autonomous reason of the Enlightenment subject began to crumble. The end of the modern view of the subject was marked by the dispassionate analysis of structuralism, summed up in Levi-Strauss’ dictum that “the ultimate goal of the human sciences is not to constitute, but to dissolve man.”²

What Levi-Strauss saw as a task, Michel Foucault saw as a destiny. In an (in)famous text which vividly depicts his rejection of the Enlightenment view of ‘man’, Foucault writes:

[M]an is an invention of recent date. And perhaps one nearing its end. If those arrangements were to disappear as they appeared, if some event of which we can at the moment do no more than sense the possibility—without knowing either what its forms will be or what it promises—were to cause them to crumble as the ground of classical thought did, at the end of the eighteenth century, then one can certainly wager that man would be erased, like a face drawn in sand at the edge of the sea.³

This kerygmatic proclamation of the end of ‘man’, expressed in a careful conditional, betrays more hope than conviction. Is it that Foucault naively believed that crying ‘wolf’ could bring about the destruction of the fold of classical anthropology, or is his intention somewhat more subtle? The hyperbolic assertion that “man is an invention” reveals that Foucault’s aim is not to challenge the ‘nature’ of man (e.g., by suggesting a new anthropology) but rather to unveil, by positing the possibility of erasure, the cultural mechanisms and discursive practices which gave rise to the accepted definition of ‘man’ and which allow it to prevail over time. In other words, Foucault disregards the conventional modes of argumentation in favor of a mode of persuasion which depends to a large degree on its own rhetorical intensity, in which possibilities are hinted at, conventions scorned, and long-established assumptions are called into question as much by the strategic force of the argument as by the evidence adduced. In this passage, ‘man’ functions as a metaphorical representation of our propensity, as Foucault sees it, to build structures of continuity by ontologising viewpoints which in their actuality are nothing more than the products of a particular socio-cultural dynamic and a certain set of power relations.

Although I shall claim that Foucault does not advocate absolute discontinuity, his anti-narratives do seek to undermine the view of the modern as expressed by Jean-Francois Lyotard when he describes as ‘modern’

any science that legitimates itself with reference to a metadiscourse of this (philosophical) kind making an explicit appeal to some grand narrative, such as the dialectics of spirit, the hermeneutics of meaning, the emancipation of the rational or working subject, or the creation of wealth.⁴

Foucault’s historical analyses offer one focal point for many of the disparate

elements which claim some affinity with the 'postmodern'. They seek to disturb any easy relationship to our past by arguing that our assertion of continuity with that past is itself an invention of our need to control the destiny of our culture and society. This interrogation of the propensity of all great narratives to domination through claims to absolute continuity is one of the most distinguishing marks of the 'postmodern'.

However, whether such anti-narratives allow us to speak of a 'crisis of continuity' is open to debate. For example, Allen Megill, the historian of ideas, has argued that there is no postmodern 'crisis of continuity'. Megill rejects the concept of 'crisis' on the basis that it presupposes the very notion of continuity which it is purporting to call into question. He asserts that "behind . . . [the] notion of crisis lies the notion of history as constituting a continuous process or movement that is somehow now in the process of being broken."⁵ If the notion of a crisis of continuity is to be intelligible, it can be so only on the basis of the assumption that history has directionality. But it is precisely this directionality which the notion of crisis is calling into question:

The convincing power of the crisis notion depends on one's prior belief in the linear or directional character of history, yet the whole point of the crisis notion is to undermine any such belief.⁶

Megill concurs with Richard Rorty's view that the notion of crisis is therefore "reactive,"⁷ as it is simply a reaction against the assumption that there is a process of continuity over time. Rorty and Megill are therefore prepared to abandon the historical process itself. From this perspective, of course, the more successful crisis thought is, the more it undermines its own *raison d'être*, for according to Megill, it is precisely "the belief that all continuity has been lost"⁸ which underlies postmodern thought.

The radical nature of this view cannot be underestimated. Unlike 'crisis' views of history, Megill, Rorty, Lyotard and others are not interested in criticizing the prevailing basis of continuity in order to place it on a different footing; rather they have no desire to posit any continuity whatsoever. Megill can therefore argue that the notion of a crisis of continuity should be abandoned, on the grounds that it "presupposes what it sets out to destroy—the idea of history as a continuous process, history with a capital H"⁹ (theologically we could say, 'tradition with a capital T'). However, the strong discontinuity advocated by Megill appears to be no less a metaphysical principle than the continuity theory which he tries to debunk, and therefore cannot simply be accepted as an absolute principle.

Despite this caveat, it is important to acknowledge that the radical postmodernist perspective adopted by Megill serves to alert us to the seriousness of the contemporary challenge facing all forms of thought which assert a line of continuity through time. In other words, the postmodern critique of continuity calls into question the very possibility of tradition. In Megill's

view one of the pioneers of the post-modern dissipation of tradition has been Michel Foucault, as evidenced by his designation as a 'prophet of extremity'; however, it remains for us to judge whether or not Foucault's texts are in agreement with the radical view of discontinuity advocated by Megill, or whether they admit of more subtle gradations of continuity and discontinuity.

2. Foucault: *The End of 'History' and 'Tradition'*

The reader of Foucault is left in no doubt about the singularly unusual character of his work, and Hugo Meynell's judgement that in Foucault one meets "a unique blend of brilliant insight and criminal lunacy"¹⁰ is not altogether without foundation. However, if one were to risk a conventional locating of Foucault in the history of thought, it would have to be primarily in relation to Nietzsche. Foucault shares the dominant Nietzschean theme of the all-pervasive mechanisms of power at the root of all culture and tradition. For Nietzsche, as for Foucault later, it is tradition which consolidates and preserves the ethical ideals and power-mechanisms which underlie all conventions and oppressions:

In things in which no tradition commands there is no morality; and the less life is determined by tradition, the smaller the circle of morality. The free human being is immoral because in all things he is *determined* to depend upon himself and not upon a tradition.¹¹

For Foucault, especially in his work of the nineteen-seventies, power is the fundamental characteristic of human culture and tradition; it "is co-extensive with the social body."¹² According to Foucault's reading of Nietzsche, this all-pervasive power is not to be equated simply with repression, but its dynamic is to be found "in the hostile engagement of forces"¹³ which characterizes all social relations. As power is so fundamental to human culture, it cannot be viewed as a 'thing' which one either possesses or does not, and which is then wielded over another as one wields a sword. To the contrary, "power is neither given, nor exchanged, nor recovered, but rather exercised, and . . . it only exists in action."¹⁴ When one considers power, argues Foucault, "it is necessary to be a nominalist: power is not an institution, a structure, or a certain force with which certain people are endowed; it is the name given to a complex strategic relation in a given society."¹⁵

As power is only present in relations, it cannot be found as an inherent possession of the intentional subject; power can only be studied "at the point where its intention, if it has one, is completely invested in its real and effective practices,"¹⁶ i.e. in societies' institutions, laws, customs, etc. Foucault's reading of power is therefore strongly anti-theory; as power can only be discovered in its material and physical expressions, an a priori definition is impossible. This is as true for society as for the individual; Foucault believes that "the great fantasy is the idea of a social body constituted by the univer-

sality of wills. Now the phenomenon of the social body is the effect not of a consensus but of the materiality of power operating on the very bodies of individuals."¹⁷ In short, everyone has power and the locus of the effects of power is the human body; hence Foucault's interest in penology, the asylum and sexuality.

This view of power means that power's role is not simply a negative one of control. As Foucault comments, "power would be a fragile thing if its only function were to repress." So, "far from preventing knowledge, power produces it"¹⁸ as, for example, in the case of the body where the exercise of power over it gave rise to the growth in physiological knowledge. For Foucault, in short, power is the means of production of knowledge.

But how does one go about analyzing the mechanisms of power in a given culture, tradition or society? How does one unveil the operations of power which lie at the heart of society's claims to continuity and stability? For Foucault, this task is achieved primarily through the application of a Nietzschean 'genealogical' mode of historical analysis which brings to the surface those "subjugated knowledges"¹⁹ which have been hitherto viewed as inconsequential. Two types of historical knowledge are combined in this analysis: general, historical, knowledge which has been ignored or hidden, and local, low-ranking, specific knowledge which was considered of no importance. Foucault gives the name 'genealogy' to "the union of erudite knowledge and local memories which allows us to establish a historical knowledge of struggles and to make use of this knowledge tactically today."²⁰

Foucault describes the aim of genealogical analysis as giving attention to "local, discontinuous, disqualified, illegitimate knowledges against the claims of a unitary body of theory which would filter, hierarchise and order them in the name of some true knowledge."²¹ Genealogical analysis is therefore a reading of history which dispenses with the need for one central point around which investigation must pivot, be that point a transcendental subject or a metaphysics of historical continuity. Genealogical analysis investigates traditions, cultures and societies as sites of the technical and positive application of power in opposition to what Foucault sees as the West's concentration on power as a purely juridical and negative property. For Foucault genealogy is the unconditional analysis of the production and exercise of power.

Even from this outline it is clear that Foucault's notion of power is not without its problems. Larry Ray has highlighted three points of weakness: i) Foucault's analysis cannot distinguish between the exercise of power in different contexts; ii) it is not clear why we should view power as solely constitutive of social relations; and iii) Foucault's analysis lacks any method which would enable us to make a normative distinction between legitimate and non-legitimate uses of power.²² Of the three points, the latter would seem to be the more serious, and this is a criticism shared by other critics. Hugo Meynell, for example, asserts that Foucault's notion of power betrays a "lack

of a coherent idea of the good, and of the human mental capacities which favor the attainment of truth and the avoidance of error."²³ Colin Gordon, on the other hand, holds that Foucault has taken the question of power beyond the binary opposition of good and evil. In Gordon's view, Foucault's refusal to view power dualistically as exercised either benignly to provide stability and coherence for the community or coercively as repressive and violent, represents a "dual precaution of method"²⁴ which results in the positive view of power as productive of knowledge.

To adjudicate between these competing readings of Foucault would require more space than is available to us in this paper. However, one point of importance can be made: even if Foucault's texts do not reveal an immediate ethic, this does not mean that they are inconsistent with any and every ethic. It is one thing to say with Meynell that Foucault's texts lack an idea of the good and quite another thing to say that his analysis of the operation of power cannot be put to constructive use by various disciplines, such as theology, which employ their own ethical criteria.

In the Nietzschean and Foucauldian world of genealogies, tradition (in the double sense of something handed down and of the assumption of identity over time) is an imposition upon the fragments of history. Tradition generally represents a hegemony of power on all levels of society: social, economic, cultural, etc. Therefore continuity must be broken, and the nineteenth century flow of development which promised a climax to history is replaced by the bewildering notion of "eternal return"²⁵ which offers no resolution of a dialectic or no safe homecoming, a vision in which tradition becomes an impossibility. This Nietzschean methodology appears as somewhat cavalier, and Foucault has been criticized frequently for the way in which he abuses the accepted rules of rational discourse.²⁶ In this he is thoroughly Nietzschean. For Nietzsche, thinking is no longer equated with Enlightenment rationality; rather it is thinking which lays reason to rest. Foucault's desire for the disappearance of 'man' is prefigured in Nietzsche's caricature of the self of Cartesian reason as a "grammatical fiction."²⁷

In his seminal essay "Nietzsche, Genealogy, History,"²⁸ which marks the turn in his thought towards the genealogy of power relations, Foucault gives one of his clearest statements on the question of history, tradition and continuity. He outlines a Nietzschean "genealogy" which "rejects the metahistorical deployment of ideal significations and indefinite teleologies" and which "opposes itself to the search for origins" (NGH, p. 77). With Nietzsche, Foucault denies the possibility of an origin (*Ursprung*)²⁹ of history, and insists that "truth or being do not lie at the root of what we know and what we are, but the exteriority of accidents" (NGH, p. 81). There is no original identity from which historical occurrences and developments can be traced; instead there is only "dissentment [and] . . . disparity" (NGH, p. 79).

Foucault uses Nietzsche's term *Herkunft* (descent) to refer to affiliation to a certain determinate group: a race, a tradition, a social class, etc. Genealogy is the analysis of *Herkunft* in order to show the multiplicity and disparity of the events through which something was formed. It is not the search for origins or the identification of points of historical continuity, but is rather the exposition of "the hazardous play of dominations" (NGH, p. 85) through which human history is created. Thus, for Foucault, "it is wrong to search for descent in an uninterrupted continuity" (NGH, p. 83). For him, on the contrary,

the traditional devices for constructing a comprehensive view of history and for retracing the past as a patient and continuous development must be systematically dismantled (NGH, p. 88).

The concept of history unveiled by genealogical analysis "opposes history given as continuity or representation of a tradition" (NGH, p. 93). It cannot be unified or synthesized, for it is diffused, fragmented and broken.

In his earlier works, *The Archaeology of Knowledge*³⁰ and *The Order of Things*, Foucault highlighted the discontinuity of history in terms of epistemes. He defines an episteme as follows:

[the] historical a priori . . . [which] in a given period, delimits in the totality of experience a field of knowledge, defines the mode of being of the objects that appear in that field, provides man's everyday perception with theoretical powers, and defines the conditions in which he can sustain a discourse about things that is recognized to be true.³¹

According to this definition, an episteme is more akin to an ethos than to an epoch, but this does not deter Foucault from delineating at least four epistemes in European history of the last three hundred years.³² There is no logical continuity between epistemes, changes between them are arbitrary, and are marked by an end-of-episteme situation in which things are no longer "perceived, described, expressed, characterized, classified and known in the same way"³³ as previously. One commentator has claimed that, in the earlier Foucault at least, "absolute discontinuity is the supreme interepistemic law."³⁴ In Foucault's later work, however, there seems to be a softening of this position; *The History of Sexuality* seems to have broken with the discontinuity theory and allows for some possibility of continuity and even evolution.³⁵

While this might seem to be a dramatic *volte face*, it can be argued, as Paul Rabinow does, that while Foucault stresses the abrupt changes in the discourses of the human sciences, his main area of study, he has never in fact glorified discontinuity to the extent of denying continuity completely. According to Rabinow, Foucault recognizes both continuity and discontinuity in history and therefore operates his reading of history as a "grid of interpretation"³⁶ through which he can analyze the relations of power and knowledge. This possibility becomes clearer when situated within Foucault's anti-meta-physical and anti-idealist standpoint. Foucault's aim is to reject any claims

to a necessary continuity in history, created by a metaphysics of reason or an imposed transcendentalism. The metaphysical principle of a unitary thread of reason running through history and reflecting the transcendental Subject is an imposition upon the facts of history and not a deduction from them, hence Foucault's spurning of a universal view of 'man'. Foucault rejects such a principle in favor of the Nietzschean idea of an "effective history" (NGH, pp. 86-90), a history without constants, which "introduces discontinuity into our very being" (NGH, p. 88). From this perspective, despite his emphasis on discontinuities, it is perhaps more accurate to describe Foucault as a thinker of non-continuity. In other words, Foucault emphasizes the non-continuous character of history which his research claims to have uncovered, without himself positing an ontology of history as radically discontinuous.

Indeed in a later interview clarifying some of his central ideas Foucault was at pains to emphasize that he never was a philosopher of discontinuity. Discussing *The Order of Things* Foucault says that his aim was to take obvious discontinuities in the human sciences at face value, and by doing so to pose the following question: "is this discontinuity really a discontinuity? Or, to be precise, what was the transformation needed to pass from one type of knowledge to another type of knowledge?". Foucault goes on to assert that "this is not at all a way of declaring the discontinuity of History; on the contrary it is a way of posing discontinuity as a problem and above all as a problem to be resolved."³⁷ If Foucault emphasizes discontinuities, it is because he finds empirical evidence for their existence, and not because he posits their existence on an a priori theory of history.

Nevertheless, this does not prevent us from supposing that all areas of human inquiry will have points of radical discontinuity when a new theory, world-view or discovery disrupts the standard dogmas. The imperative of investigation is then to uncover the ways in which continuity and transition were maintained and the reasons given (then and now) for that continuity, with the aim of discovering whether or not these reasons concur with the evidence afforded by the original investigation. Take one obvious theological example, namely, the decision of the early Christians to preach to the Gentiles. Modern scholarship is well aware of the divisions which this issue caused in the early church, but subsequent Christian thinking has been unanimous in its agreement that this evident discontinuity was not really a discontinuity when the truly universal nature of the Christian message was appreciated. Of course in this instance Christian theology has achieved its own genealogical reading, but it is not hard to imagine more difficult cases (e.g., the formation of the Protestant churches after the Reformation, the continued relevance of a moral teaching based on 'natural law' in the face of modern medical advances) where the question of continuity and discontinuity requires much more attention than it has so far received.

However, despite the disclaimers made by Foucault against those who see him as an advocate of complete discontinuity, it is evident, even from this brief outline, that Foucault's way of reading history entails an intense challenge to the way in which Christian theology has understood its own history, namely, as tradition: the continuous and unbroken handing-on of the gospel by means of the scriptures and the life and teaching of the church. Thus, the common Christian understanding of tradition has as its origin the events and interpretations surrounding the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ, and it is precisely the claim to continuity with the originating events that Foucault asserts is questioned by genealogical analysis. Genealogy, he says, "transposes the relationship ordinarily established between the eruption of an event and necessary continuity" (NGH, p. 88) and thus repudiates any theological or rationalist attempts to dissolve singular events into an ideal continuity, understood as either a natural process or a teleological movement.

A genealogical reading of history is, for Foucault, "the inverse of the Christian world" which he perceives as "spun entirely by a divine spider" (NGH, p. 88). What Foucault rejects here is not continuity or even tradition *per se*, but any tendency towards a 'natural' or teleological development which would place the burden of a mechanistic determinism upon the "countless lost events" of history which admit of no final landmark or reference-point. In other words, Foucault is warning us that tradition is not something which we can presume as an ontological datum, but is rather something which we create out of the disjointed phenomena of history, while frequently neglecting to notice the radical breaks which distance us, unconsciously, from our past.

The crucial issue to be addressed, therefore, is not the accuracy of Foucault's historical research,³⁸ but rather what his enterprise tells us about the concept of tradition: by careful analysis of the past we come to a realization of the *discontinuities* in history and are thus impelled to search for the grounds of continuity as well as warned against the creation of absolute metaphysical continuities. Furthermore, we are alerted to both our own distance from and closeness to previous eras, cultures and systems of thought, and to the strategies and mechanisms of power through which each tradition has been formed. Foucault teaches us to think of the vulnerability and ambiguity of all traditions. Within this reading of Foucault's work it continues to make sense, against Megill and Rorty, to speak of a crisis of continuity engendered by contemporary epistemological and metaphysical skepticism. After all, by continuing to advocate radical discontinuity these thinkers are themselves creating a tradition of sorts, and there is a strong tradition of disclaiming metaphysics from Nietzsche to Rorty! What remains to be thought through is how, given this postmodern crisis of continuity, we can continue to affirm the concept of tradition at all; and if we do affirm tradition on this conceptual level, we are

impelled to investigate the further question of the power mechanisms of the tradition and of the interests which they serve.

3. *The Future of Tradition*

If we accept Foucault's thesis that each tradition is, potentially at least, a set of broken and fragmented events with no absolute coherence, unified only by the imposition of a transcendental framework which reflects an idealist metaphysics, then a re-appraisal of the theological concept of tradition is called for. Obviously, a material investigation (i.e., one which undertakes a historical analysis along the lines of those done by Foucault) of elements of the tradition is beyond the bounds of the present article, so I will simply highlight a number of areas on the formal theological level where Foucault's critique of tradition can provoke interest.

a). *Methodology*. Methodologically, a Foucauldian reading of any tradition requires close attention to the breaks, disruptions and discontinuities which the tradition has attempted to suppress and to the network of power relations which has operated to give the tradition its particular character. This would demand, to employ Derrida's term, a 'deconstruction' or unravelling of those parts of the tradition where the claims to continuity were strongest, thereby suggesting that the threat or reality of discontinuity was also present. To take two of many possible examples: to what extent is the current teaching of the Roman Catholic church on divorce actually 'traditional'; and, what impact did the desire to maintain continuity of teaching have on the final form of *Humanae Vitae*? How is power exercised within the church on these crucial moral issues? How did such issues of family morality become the subject of a public and universal church teaching? A 'genealogical' reading such as is demanded in these examples entails detailed investigation and critique of the tradition, not merely citation and/or appeal to authority, least of all to authorities or texts which are themselves under review.

The Foucauldian question to theology is, then, how to theologise with a tradition whose continuity can no longer be guaranteed either by a guiding authority or a metaphysics of history and whose very existence is branded with a network of power exchanges which we have yet to understand. When Foucault asserts that "it is not possible for power to be exercised without knowledge, it is impossible for knowledge not to engender power"³⁹, he presents a challenge to all disciplines to undertake an investigation of their own methodologies which are designed to produce knowledge. That the production of theological knowledge is intimately linked to the production and exercise of power is something which theological methodology has never seriously considered. What is at stake then is our own understanding of how transition from one form of knowledge and thinking to new forms is possible without destroying the tradition completely. What is at stake is nothing less

than our own capacity to shape both the present and the future, to create new knowledges and new relations of power which influence each other for the better. Dissipation of long-established authorities, continuities or power structures does not destroy the past; it simply calls for its re-configuration. How the past, and through it the present, is re-configured becomes one of the primary tasks of a postmodern theology.

b). *Hermeneutics*. Foucault saw the aim of his work as to enquire into a specific historical subject and to “bring it to light as it existed at the time.”⁴⁰ The primary purpose of his historical work was to describe the operating power mechanisms as closely as possible and not to provide a comprehensive explanatory theory to account for all the diverse realities which any era contains. Foucault’s distrust of explanatory theory would seem to result from a desire to allow a particular history to speak for itself so that the disruptions, discontinuities and displacements of a tradition are not subsumed under the umbrella of an all-encompassing theory or a neat series of authoritative texts and interpretations which would then function as the accepted ideology of the community.

Despite the fact that Foucault has been criticized for this lack of attention to hermeneutics⁴¹, it seems unlikely that he was so blind to hermeneutical possibilities as to think that interpretation could be infinitely deferred, even granted that a consummate theory of explanation is not desirable. As Paul Ricoeur has pointed out, the risk which interpretation takes in saying that this or that text or event has a particular meaning always involves us in a “conflict of interpretations”⁴² which is not easily resolved. But this risk cannot be avoided by trying to remain on some safe level of purely empirical description. It would seem unnecessary, then, to give an ontological status to Foucault’s priority of genealogical description over explanatory theory. This priority is rather temporal and strategic, challenging us to leave aside our hermeneutical baggage and allow the historical evidence to shock us into new configurations and readings of the tradition.

Foucault did, however, sometimes nod in the direction of hermeneutics. Consider the following passage in which he claims that all his work is in a certain sense a fiction:

I am well aware that I have never written anything but fictions. I do not mean to say, however, that truth is therefore absent. It seems to me that the possibility exists for fiction to function in truth, for a fictional discourse to induce effects of truth, and for bringing it about that a true discourse engenders or ‘manufactures’ something that does not as yet exist, that is, ‘fictions’ it.⁴³

Both the hermeneutical possibilities referred to in this passage are applicable to aspects of Christian theology. The first, namely that a fictional discourse can induce effects of truth, is the principle on which we accept that the Song of Songs, the Book of Revelation and even the parables of Jesus are revela-

tory. The second, namely that a true discourse engenders unthought fictions, raises the interesting question of the role of imagination in theological hermeneutics. When Christian theology comes to interpret a tradition which it adheres to as in some way 'true', it can only do so successfully by an act of creative imagination which 'fictions' new ways of understanding through which the tradition can be appropriated in the present.

In discussing the relationship between tradition and imaginative innovation, Paul Ricoeur has written that tradition must be viewed not as the "inert transmission of some already dead deposit of material but as the living transmission of an innovation always capable of being reactivated by a return to the most creative moments of poetic activity."⁴⁴ Commenting on this text from Ricoeur, Richard Kearney says that "tradition can only survive, can only pass itself on from one generation to the next, by fostering creative innovation in its midst."⁴⁵ Thus, whether one prefers Ricoeur's 'poetic' imagination or Foucault's 'fictions', the message for theology is the same: history or tradition cannot be successfully appropriated without hermeneutical activity which employs a creative imagination. The origin of many doctrines and theologies (e.g., Augustine's psychological model of the Trinity, Anselm's doctrine of atonement, contemporary process theology) would be unthinkable without the role of such an imagination.

However, what Foucault alerts us to above all is the way in which such hermeneutical innovation, while avoiding the error of simply repeating the tradition, lacks a means of analyzing the role of power in the origins and dynamic unfolding of the tradition. A Foucauldian genealogy of power structures can provide an important corrective to a theological hermeneutics of innocence which would assume too quickly that the tradition is an unblemished continuity of benign influences (or, the opposite, that the tradition has offered only oppression and coercion). If theology accepts with Foucault that all traditions are marked by traces of power structures which are not immediately evident, and if it accepts that these or other power structures are constitutive of the tradition's origins, then it would seem that some form of genealogical analysis should be a necessary component of all theological hermeneutics.

c.) *Discourse*. Towards what form of discourse on the tradition does a Foucauldian genealogy prompt us? Primarily, it is a discourse on discourse; more precisely, it is a critical reflection of theological thinking on itself. In an essay on Kant's *Was ist Aufklärung?* Foucault reads this text as the first problematizing of thought by thought, a self-consciousness which seeks to uncover an ontology of the present through a questioning of the discourse which rules the present.⁴⁶ This problematizing of a contemporary discourse involves us in analysis of the discourse of our own specific culture. In Foucault's words, "it is no longer simply the question of how one belongs to a human community in general, but rather that of how one belongs to a certain

'us,' to an us that concerns a cultural totality characteristic of one's own time."⁴⁷ In other words, it is the present discourse of the community, generated by the tradition, which becomes of interest. No less than the philosopher in her discipline, the theologian is impelled to ask: 'What is this present in which I find myself? What is the tradition which has determined it? What mechanisms of power within the tradition govern the discourse in which I engage, lay down its rules and conventions, set the boundaries of its progress? What unconscious ideologies operate in the practices of this community?'

Is this questioning of discourse to be found in contemporary critical theology, for example in liberation and feminist theologies? To a certain extent, yes, through their rejection of the way in which the present system of discourse seeks to keep in place structures of oppression based on economic or sexual discrimination. In a recent article on a feminist reconstruction of biblical texts,⁴⁸ Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza indicates the type of discourse on the tradition which I am suggesting here. Schüssler Fiorenza argues that for a feminist theology to be effective it is not enough simply to develop new readings within the methodological and epistemological parameters of the dominant patriarchal theologies which perpetuate patriarchy by continuing to advocate scholarly disinterestedness as a prerequisite to investigation of the tradition. For a feminist (or any other) theology to break down this situation it is imperative to "interrogate the power/knowledge relations inscribed in biblical texts and in the contemporary discourses on biblical studies."⁴⁹ This entails a re-reading of the texts in the light of the demands of the present; it is, as I suggested above, a partly imaginative enterprise. But, as with Foucault, Schüssler Fiorenza denies that this re-figuring of history is a lie: "Such an emancipatory reconstruction of our cultural and religious past is not a fictive creation out of nothing, but a disciplined argument for a *different* historical consciousness and imagination."⁵⁰ A Foucauldian reading of a tradition constantly seeks to undermine the dominant ideologies by calling into question the discourse which says that the tradition be read in this way or that way only, the same critical and interested reading which Schüssler Fiorenza suggests must be brought to the patriarchal structures of contemporary theology.

Nevertheless, despite the promising steps being taken by theologians such as Schüssler Fiorenza, it is not an unfair assertion to say that the task of uncovering the genealogy of the discourse of the theological present is one which is only beginning. The role that the theologian or philosopher plays in this discourse is primarily one of facilitating the process of questioning. The primary task of the critical religious thinker is to examine the tradition, not to repeat it, and through examining the tradition to allow the present to be reshaped more closely along the lines of what the tradition truly stands for. For example, what Foucault asked of psychiatry, the theologian asks of the theologies, laws, ecclesial structures and moral teachings of the contemporary

church, namely, is it possible that it "is not on good terms with its own history."⁵¹ In other words, is contemporary thinking genuinely in line with the tradition, does it welcome investigation of the tradition, or is it afraid of the potentially disruptive nature of its own history? A similar role can be played by the philosopher in regard to the rational foundations of theological argument, by the historian in regard to the socio-political origins of some doctrines, etc.

This analysis of the discourse of the present through attention to the tradition raises again the question of power and the way in which power and powers control current theological discourse. Theology, if it is to take Foucault's challenge seriously, must ask: what is the connection between power and that theological knowledge which is now being, or has been over the centuries, discovered or employed?

Let us focus on one example of contemporary interest, the question of the ordination of women. A genealogical reading of the history of this question, which is also, as Foucault reminds us, the history of the present, asks questions such as these: what mechanisms are at work in the discourse concerning the ordination of women and the refusal of many theologians and church authorities to view a generally accepted human right (equality of the sexes) as a valid theological criterion?; what view of tradition is operative here?; what is the history of the power relations and the theological knowledge to which they gave rise, a knowledge which seems capable of being utilized on both sides of a very divisive argument?; to what extent is progress on this and other issues prevented by a systematic control of discourse which maintains within clearly defined limits the grounds for argument, the criteria acceptable, and the evidence admissible for a judgement to be reached. Analysis of this discourse to reveal the control mechanisms at work is as much the task of a critical theology as is engagement in the discourse itself. Foucault has reminded us that no analysis of discourse is complete without an investigation of the power relations in which the knowledge appealed to in the discourse originated and which continue to govern that discourse. This is a challenge which theology has yet to accept.

d.) *The Body*. Foucault's studies on traditions such as penology, the asylum and sexuality have highlighted the ways in which power is exercised over the subject by means of the disciplining of the body. Despite the obviously positive connotations of the doctrine of the resurrection of the body, it is generally accepted that Christianity (at least since Augustine) has operated with a predominantly negative view of the flesh. Furthermore, Christianity has contributed in no small way to the institutionalization of the body; schools, hospitals, seminaries, monasteries and convents, religious houses, etc. all played a role in the way in which the body has come to be organized in modern society. To point this out is in no way to impugn negative connotations to each of these institutions or to link them causally to a pessimistic view of sexuality. Nevertheless, theology still

lacks a history which would give attention to the specifics of the body's treatment in Christianity. Perhaps the closest to such a work which we have is Peter Brown's fascinating study *The Body and Society: Men, Women, and Sexual Renunciation in Early Christianity*.⁵² It is not surprising to discover that Foucault and Brown each influenced the other's work.⁵³

While the history of the body in Christianity remains to be written, it is not difficult to see that the legacy of this history, whatever the details of its development, has left contemporary Christianity with a sophisticated network of relations and codes surrounding the body. From a Foucauldian point of view contemporary Christianity seems to reflect an esoteric concept of the body. For example, it is usually the 'spiritual' consequences of physical acts which have primary importance in judging their level of acceptability; this requires the existence (especially in Roman Catholicism) of very clear laws regarding the body. Roman Catholic Canon Law and moral teaching lay down quite specific rules with regard to the exact nature of the act of coitus in the consummation of marriage, forms of contraception, certain dietary rules, the law of celibacy, restricted access to sacred places (the prohibition of altar-girls), the dress of priests and religious, etc. These moral teachings and laws merit varying levels of theological justification, but they all underscore the view that one approaches the body only through the medium of the 'spiritual', i.e., through a long history of the 'spiritualization' of the body which has been developed through theologies of creation, sin, suffering, etc., and in rites of initiation and passage (baptism, marriage, last rites). The Christian body exists from cradle to grave within this network of symbolization in which the body is more than a simple body; it is part of the Body of Christ, the church, and is therefore no longer its own possession. However, to highlight these aspects of the treatment of the body is not to imply that there has been a unilateral 'tradition' of oppression of the body in Christianity. As Foucault has shown us, the genealogical imperative is to read the mechanisms of power over the body through an interpretive 'grid' which allows both continuity and discontinuity, both benign influence and oppression, to surface where they are actually part of the historical reality.

Perhaps one of the most disturbing, but least emphasized aspects of liberation theology for the established, 'spiritualized' theology of the body which has gained precedence in Christianity is its emphasis on the body *per se*, on how much it is fed, on its shelter, on its right to protection from abuse by drugs, torture, or overwork, etc. Despite this liberation emphasis on bodilyness, however, Christian theology has generally been slow to respond to the modern emphasis on the autonomy of the body (e.g., its sexual expression, its glorification in sport, its protection by international conventions and agreements such as the *United Nations Declaration on Human Rights*). The admittedly mammoth task of re-examining the history of both the theology

of the body and the actual treatment of the body in Christianity is now overdue. Foucault, through his introduction of the subjects of the body as body into postmodern discourse has simply pointed out the necessity of this task.

Conclusion

Despite these potential theological fruits of Foucault's work, his own research cannot simply be adopted as a model for another discipline. Given the idiosyncratic nature of Foucault's genealogical analysis and the problematic accuracy of his conclusions within limited areas of research, a note of caution must be adopted. Both the continuities and the discontinuities which Foucault demonstrates in one sphere of investigation (e.g., penology) may not necessarily be true in the case of another sphere (e.g., the university, politics, religion); and the power relations discovered in one era or area of life may not necessarily be paralleled in another. Generalizations must be avoided. The import of Foucault's work, rather, is that he alerts us to the danger of assuming that the past was a homogeneous, univocal reality with which we can claim direct continuity. This should impel us to an analysis of the particular past in question, in our case that of the history of Christianity's interpretation of its own originating events, in order to ascertain from the phenomena what continuities or discontinuities do or do not exist. A theology which would take Foucault's challenge seriously would admit from the outset that the continuity of tradition can no longer be a premise from which we deduce other truths, or even an attainable goal which we have not yet reached. At best tradition is an unresolved dialectic of broken continuities and interrupting discontinuities with which we engage in constant discourse.

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NOTES

1. Martin Heidegger, *Nietzsche*, vol. 4, *Nihilism* (New York: Harper and Row, 1982), p. 28.

2. Claude Levi-Strauss, *The Savage Mind* (London: Wiedenfeld and Nicolson, 1972), p. 245.

3. Michel Foucault, *The Order of Things: An Archaeology of the Human Sciences* (New York: Random House, 1970), p. 387.

4. Jean-Francois Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge*, trans. Geoff Bennington and Brian Massumi (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984), p. xxiii.

5. Allen Megill, *Prophets of Extremity: Nietzsche, Heidegger, Foucault, Derrida* (Berkeley, Los Angeles, London: University of California Press, 1985), p. 145.

6. *Ibid.*, p. 296.
7. See Richard Rorty, *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1980), pp. 365-66 and Megill, *Prophets of Extremity*, p. 297.
8. Megill, *Prophets of Extremity*, p. 112.
9. *Ibid.*, p. 346.
10. Hugo Meynell, "On Knowledge, Power and Michel Foucault," *The Heythrop Journal* 30 (1989), pp. 419-32.
11. Nietzsche, "Daybreak" #9, in *A Nietzsche Reader*, ed. R.J. Hollingdale (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1987), p. 87.
12. Foucault, "Powers and Strategies," in *Power/Knowledge: Selected Interviews and Other Writings 1972-77*, ed. Colin Gordon (New York: Pantheon Books, 1980), p. 142 [Hereafter "P/K"].
13. Foucault, "Two Lectures," P/K, p. 91.
14. *Ibid.*, p. 89.
15. Foucault, quoted by Colin Gordon, Afterward to P/K, p. 236.
16. Foucault, "Two Lectures," P/K, p. 97.
17. Foucault, "Body/Power," P/K, p. 55.
18. *Ibid.*, p. 59.
19. Foucault, "Two Lectures," P/K, p. 81.
20. *Ibid.*, p. 83.
21. *Ibid.*
22. See Larry Ray, "Foucault, Critical Theory and the Decomposition of the Historical Subject," *Philosophy and Social Criticism* 14:1 (1988), pp. 97-98.
23. Meynell, "On Power, Knowledge, and Michel Foucault," p. 431.
24. Colin Gordon, Afterward to P/K, p. 235.
25. On the concept of "eternal return" see Nietzsche's *Thus Spake Zarathustra*, III and IV, and Foucault's *The Order of Things*, pp. 262-63.
26. See Meynell (Note 10 above) and Jacques Derrida's critique of Foucault, "Cogito and the History of Madness" in *Writing and Difference*, trans. Alan Bass (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1978), pp. 31-63.
27. Nietzsche, quoted by David B. Allison in *The New Nietzsche*, (London and Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1985), p. xiii.
28. Foucault, "Nietzsche, Genealogy, History," in *The Foucault Reader*, ed. Paul Rabinow (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1986), pp. 76-100. Further references to this work are given in the text as "NGH".
29. For a recent critique of Foucault's use of Nietzsche see John Pizer, "The Use and Abuse of "Ursprung": On Foucault's Reading of Nietzsche," *Nietzsche Studien* 19 (1990), pp. 462-78.
30. *The Archaeology of Knowledge*. (New York: Harper and Row, 1972).
31. Foucault, *The Order of Things*, p. xxii.
32. On these epistemes see *The Order of Things*, pp vii, 1.

33. *Ibid.*, p. 217.
34. J. G. Merquior, *Foucault* (Fontana Modern Masters, ed. Frank Kermode; London: Fontana/Collins, 1985), p. 42.
35. See Foucault, *The History of Sexuality*, Vol. 1: *An Introduction* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1981); Vol. 2: *The Use of Pleasures*, trans. R. Hurley (New York: Pantheon, 1985); Vol. 3: *The Care of the Self*, trans. R. Hurley (New York: Pantheon, 1985).
36. Paul Rabinow, ed., *The Foucault Reader*, Introduction, p. 9.
37. Foucault, "On Power," an interview with Pierre Boncenne in *Politics, Philosophy, Culture: Interviews and Other Writings 1977-84*, trans. Alan Sheridan, ed. with an introduction by Lawrence D. Kritzman (New York and London: Routledge, 1988), p. 100.
38. J. G. Merquior, *Foucault*, pp. 62-71 outlines six kinds of phenomena which Foucault ignores in order to bolster his contention that epistemes are monolithic.
39. Foucault, "Prison Talk," P/K, p. 52.
40. Foucault, "Critical Theory/Intellectual History," *Politics, Philosophy, Culture*, p. 39.
41. Ray, "Foucault . . .," p. 96.
42. See Paul Ricoeur, *The Conflict of Interpretations* (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1974).
43. Foucault, "The History of Sexuality," an interview with Lucette Finas, P/K, p. 193.
44. Paul Ricoeur, *Time and Narrative*, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1984), p. 68, quoted in Richard Kearney, "Paul Ricoeur and the Hermeneutic Imagination," *Philosophy and Social Criticism* 14:2 (1988), p. 133.
45. Kearney, "Paul Ricoeur . . .," p. 133.
46. Foucault, "The Art of Telling the Truth," *Politics, Philosophy, Culture*, pp. 86-95.
47. *Ibid.*, p. 88.
48. Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, "Text and Reality—Reality as Text: The Problem of a Feminist Historical and Social Reconstruction Based on Texts," *Studia Theologica* 43 (1989), pp. 19-34.
49. *Ibid.*, p. 23.
50. *Ibid.*, p. 31.
51. Foucault, interview with Finas, P/K, p. 192.
52. Peter Brown, *The Body and Society: Men, Women and Sexual Renunciation in Early Christianity* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1988).
53. See Foucault, "The Return of Morality," *Politics, Philosophy, Culture*, pp. 244-45, and Brown, *The Body and Society*, pp. xvii-xviii.