Special Section
on Religion and Social Theory

Edited by Kathleen McPhillips

Three of the essays that appear in this special section on social theory were presented at the 2001 AASR conference held at Melbourne University last year. All three presenters (Bendle, Possamai-Inesedy and Possamai) were grappling with central issues and arguments in the field of social theory and religion. The essays however, engaged not only with central arguments but also current understandings of religion, understandings that aim at stretching and indeed challenging some of the dominant frameworks of knowledge that the sociology of religion relies upon in the production of knowledge about religion and culture. The tropes and strategies of post-modernity provide a rich ground for the re-imagination of the religious self and society as well as deconstructing well used social understandings of religiosity. Two of the essays use case studies and interviews as empirical evidence and documentation. Bendle's essay on Foucault and the potential of appreciating the extra-discursive against readings of social constructionism, makes a very important contribution to theorising religious experience and in particular the realms of mysticism. The essays by Fleming and McPhillips aim to introduce readers to areas of social theory that may not be well known. Chris Fleming's essay on the work of literary theorist Rene Girard introduces readers to this important but not well known body of work. Perhaps given the recent levels of global violence, this essay can be seen as contributing to paradigmatic ways of theorising the cultures of violencethat the contemporary world produces. (The theme of violence and the work of Rene Girard is also the subject of John Moses' review of Gil Baile's book *Violence at he Crossroads*, further on in this volume). Kathleen McPhillips' essay is also an introduction to feminist responses to the theorisation of the sacred in the social theory, and considers the ways in which the sacred is being re-positioned in post-modern accounts of the social world.

The essays are also a timely welcome to the World Congress of Sociology that will take place in Brisbane at the University if Queensland from 7-14 July this year. There are 15 separate sessions on religion alone, covering themes from religion and the family to religion and popular culture. Hans Mol will chair two sessions revisiting his early research on religion and identity in Australian society. There are numerous Australian scholars in religion taking part, as well as many international colleagues and visitors. It will be an important opportunity to re-consider religious activity and meaning across the planet, as well as deliberating on local contexts. I hope the essays in this section raise more questions and issues and lead to further discussion – possibly at the AASR conference in Armidale in early July, as well as the World Congress in Brisbane.

Refereed Articles

Foucault, Religion and Governmentality

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Michel Foucault's analysis of governmentality and biopolitics has had a major impact on current theories of the state and public policy, especially in areas relating to corporeality, the body and the self (Gordon and Miller 1991; Ransom 1997; Moss 1998). This essay discusses these concepts in the context of Foucault's later work on religion, showing how vital this work was for this type of analysis. It proceeds by reviewing some notable recent contributions to the understanding of Foucault and religion, noting their strengths but also seeking to redress a subtle bias in their work towards an over-emphasis of the social constructionist and discourse-analytic reading of Foucault's position. An alternative reading is offered that foregrounds the notion of 'limit experiences' in this area of Foucault's work and stresses the scope and power of his critique of the role religion plays in the emergence of contemporary forms of governmentality. It develops this argument in connection with a consideration of Foucault's unpublished fourth volume of his History of Sexuality, 'Confessions of the Flesh', and a review of relevant Foucaultian concepts.

Foucault and Religious Studies

The thought of Michel Foucault has been immensely influential in many fields since the 1960s. More recently it has assumed a notable profile in theology and the study of religion. For example, it provides support for the antifoundationalism and antirealism embraced by postmodernist theologians like Mark C. Taylor and Don Cupitt, with their rejection of transcendental signifiers like 'God', and universalist metanarratives like the Christian gospel. It is also associated with radical critiques of the state of scholarship in these fields. Russell McCutcheon (1997:51) for example, applies Foucaultian discourse analysis to reject the view that religion is *sui generis*, constituting "an autonomous universe with its own laws and structures" separate from the rest of culture and society. Richard King (1999:210) similarly invokes

Foucault to argue that "'religion'...is a theoretical construction useful for the purposes of examining one particular aspect of the human experience but should not be reified [or treated] as if it were more than an explanatory construct with a particular cultural and ideological genealogy of its own." Jeremy Carrette (2000:146) follows this same line to assert that religious discourses "are always framed and positioned in and through the human process of power/knowledge" and "religion is a sphere of force relations in the wider cultural network - it inescapably exists as a manifestation of power." (2000:148). For Grace Jantzen (1998:192), a central lesson to be learned from Foucault "is that 'truth' is not something that exists independently of social construction or position, but is constituted as truth by those able to assert the power to do so." Fulkerson and Dunlap (1997:117) similarly conclude that a Foucaultian inquiry "concerns the relation of practices and languages and institutions that produce 'truth' about reality while 'subjugating' other possibilities." Specifically, "the discourse on *sui generis* religion de-emphasizes difference, history, and sociopolitical context in favor of abstract essences and homogeneity." (McCutcheon 1997:3) Consequently, we must turn to Foucault "to 'think differently' about religion as the 'spiritual' and 'religious' are collapsed, or 'dispersed', into a new set of force relations." (Carrette, 2000:143) Such a reordering "transforms the entire field of religion into an immanent process of 'governmentality'." (Carrette, 2000:139).

These applications of Foucault's work echo its similar critical deployment in other fields, seeking to reduce disciplinary discourses to systems of power/knowledge, revealing their repressive, normalizing and exploitative dimensions. They derive much of their power from the social constructionism associated with Foucault's approach, leading frequently to a rejection of any possibility of an extra-discursive, and perhaps transcendent, realm, and to the affirmation of immanence as the only available zone of human experience. As Carrette (2000:146 [emphasis added]) puts it: "discourses about the limits of existence and the mystery of being are **always** framed and positioned in and through the human process of power/knowledge. In this sense 'transcendence' is only a useful concept if it is grounded in the transformations that occur within the immanent processes of life." Specifically, such processes involve particular technologies, micro-politics and especially the body and sexuality - so much so that "after Foucault...religion is **always** about the body and sexual orientation." (Carrette 2000:146 [emphasis added]) A number of recent works seek to comprehensively explore the implications of this type of perspective. For example, Jantzen (1995) provided a Foucaultian analysis of the category of 'mystic' to show how medieval religious discourse frequently silenced and oppressed women mystics, and to argue that it must be subsumed within a broader concern with social justice. Central to her argument is the Foucaultian insight that traditional constructions of mysticism have always privileged intellect and devalorized the body. King (1999) carried out a similar discourse analysis with respect to the West's imperialist appropriation of 'Eastern mysticism'. In a subsequent work, Jantzen (1998:2) attempts to develop a feminist philosophy of religion based on natality. She rejects a patriarchal master-discourse

that she sees as "preoccupied with violence, sacrifice, and death," to offer an alternative discourse that "begins with birth, and with the hope and possibility and wonder implicit in it." Jantzen (1998:4) seeks to deconstruct "the masculinist imaginary of death...in order to open the way to a feminist symbolic of natality and flourishing, a symbolic of becoming divine." Carrette (2000:82) develops a similar theme in exploring Foucault's contributions to the development of a gay spiritual identity, asserting that "according to Foucault, in (male) sexuality we face not only the absence of God but also our own death. The body and God are thus fundamentally fused together in the realisation of the finitude of human life." In such analyses we see a desire to use Foucault's work to open up "an embodied and lived reality where spirit is body and body spirit...religion and theology become questions of the sexed-body." (2000:147)

While these types of analyses have much to offer, they are not without flaws. The main problem is that while they seek to overcome the debilitating effects of the spirit-body dualism that characterizes Christianity, they tend to do so by simply collapsing transcendence into immanence, the realm of the spirit into the world of the corporeal, so that, as Jantzen (1998:274 [emphasis added]) concludes: "that which is divine precisely is the world and its ceaselessly shifting bodies and signifiers." It is a manifestly materialist position that overlooks the linguistic turn and is more reminiscent of the English and French materialism of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries than of the post-structuralist thought of the present - despite frequent references to 'corporeality', 'the body' and 'embodiedness', etc. and the invocation of Foucaultian and Lacanian terms ('the Other', 'the Symbolic', etc.) to imply an association with contemporary semiotically-informed types of analyses. Consequently, Jantzen (1998:274) ignores the latter to specifically endorse "the common-sense recognition that consciousness develops out of physical complexity," and asserts that different consciousnesses arise simply "because we all have different bodies and undergo different (embodied) experiences." Despite the parenthetical references to the body, this is not consistent with the post-structuralist approach and is in fact both behaviourist and a form of essentialist materialism, in the technical sense used in the philosophy of religion, according to which, "thoughts, feelings, desires and the like exist but they are either identical with or composed of material objects and processes (the brain or the physical body and its processes as a whole). [Moreover,] there is no possible world in which there are immaterial things whether these be God, gods, angels or disembodied thoughts and feelings." (Taliaferro, 1998:88). In effect, this perspective risks becoming merely the mirror-image of the dualism it attacks, elevating an insufficiently critical valorization of the material world, the body and the corporeal into a dominant position within an inverted but still dualistic hierarchy of determinism.

The Really Radical Foucault

The irony is that such an outcome is neither mandated nor required by Foucault, who was not a naturalist, behaviourist or materialist in this sense at all. Also, and precisely because he avoided such an essentialist philosophical commitment, Foucault

did not at all foreclose the possibility of an irruption into the world of an extra-discursive realm akin to the numinous in its effects. Indeed, he described such events on a number of occasions, adopting Georges Bataille's term of 'limit-experience' to describe them, noting that they appeared corporeal in origin, and had as their primary effect the radical destabilization of the subject, its contingent identities and its relationships to the world, including those implicitly accepted by the writers discussed above.

At issue here are the limits of language and discourse and consequently of social constructionism and discourse analysis as mechanisms of world construction and deconstruction, respectively. As King (1999:169) notes, "the social contructivist position...has now become the mainstream philosophical position within the study of mysticism...one finds an almost universal rejection of the possibility of an unconditioned or unmediated experience of reality." This position is in fundamental opposition to the insights of theologically-informed post-structuralists like Michel de Certeau, who explicitly associates the mystical with access to such an unmediated realm. Indeed, "mystic utterance becomes paradigmatic of an Other, an Unnameable, which appears in language which is consciously attempting to subvert its own logic" (Ward 1997:597). Certeau believes this unmediated 'scene of the Other' can be glimpsed when the symbolic and discursive order is breached or ruptured. He calls this glimpse *ravissement* and as Ward (1997:597-8) notes, it is "a word with mystical connotations, but which also has many affinities with Barthes's post-structuralist 'bliss and the *jouissance* of Lacan, Foucault, Irigaray and Kristeva." Indeed, while Foucault recognized the profound power of language and made great use of discourse analysis, he never completely repudiated the possibility of 'pure experience', citing moments of intensity:

> ...when all of discursive language is constrained to come undone in the violence of the body and the cry, and when thought, forsaking the wordy interiority of consciousness, becomes a material energy, the suffering of the flesh, the persecution and rending of the subject itself. (Foucault, 2000b:151)

At issue here also is the question of the reality and nature of the extra-discursive or extra-symbolic realm whose irruption Foucault is describing here, the *urgrund*, or 'ground of being' from which reality proceeds: what Jacques Lacan called 'the Real'; Friedrich Schelling, the "wild, self-dismembering madness, which is...the innermost trait of all things" (Dews, 1995:132); Julia Kristeva, the abject and chaotic Other that she calls the *khora* (Ward, 1997:587); or the divine Other that Michel de Certeau (1992:297) believes 'ravishes' the self, echoing "in the body like an inner voice that one cannot specify by name but that transforms one's use of words;" or what Slavoj Zizek (1999:259) celebrated as "the orgasm of forces" that threatens at any moment to explode from within both reality and the subject, to dissolve the innermost structure of the world. The difficulty with the social-constructionist analysis of mysticism and

related states in terms of power relationships is that while it illuminates conditions of oppression it doesn't come to grips with this numinous realm that may be finding expression through such states - through the limit-experiences that Foucault cultivated, for example. Indeed, it tends to avoid or even reject the notion of such a realm, apparently on the (problematic) basis that it amounts to an affirmation of traditional notions of divinity and somehow ratifies oppressive power relations (Jantzen, 1995:12; Staal, 1975:96-7). Whatever the validity of such a rejection in connection with Christianity, King (1999:172) has pointed out that it is quite Eurocentric and undermines the truth-claims and authority of central teachings and institutions in the major non-Western religions, which have stronger traditions of mysticism and concern with the numinous. These traditions have long served as Christianity's devalorized Other, and the constructivist position therefore continues this subordination. From this perspective, Foucault's project can equally be understood as giving voice to subjugated traditions **within** the West, to giving expression to the 'Other of Reason' as Foucault himself argued in *Madness and Civilization.*

Indeed, an alternative reading of the evidence relating to mysticism and related states of consciousness suggests that the numinous refers to a *real presence* in the world and to a perennial, but invariably devalorized and suppressed human experience; an awareness of the ecstatic potential of human existence that has always been conceived of in terms of fearfulness and awe; a recognition that there exists a force within human societies that possesses the capacity to shatter and burst asunder taken-for-granted personal identities and social realities. It is with this that Foucault was concerned; he was concerned with 'the Other of Reason' that lurked as a subjugated potential within the 'civilized' social and personality structures of the West.

To argue this is not to suggest that Foucault was a theist or anything other than the atheist he proclaimed himself to be. It is also not to suggest that he was a mystic, and certainly not as this term has been variously understood in the West (Carrette, 1999:19-24; Jantzen, 1995; King, 1999; Staal, 1975). Indeed, like Bataille, he had more in common with a sort of neo-shamanism, as we will see below (James, 1997:5; Lewis, 1971). Rather, it is to suggest, that Foucault had a number of insights and experiences that profoundly affected him and left him with two major tasks in the final phase of his career. His first task was to comprehend a mode of ecstatic experience that radically relativizes the sense of self and subjecthood within the world, while also bearing unavoidable implications for how one should live one's life. The Jesuit scholar James Bernauer (1990:159-60) refers to this as the period of Foucault's 'ecstatic thinking', that was manifest in two transitions in his thought: a new focus on ethical subjectivity and the 'care of the self' associated with a late shift in Foucault's scholarly concerns from the modern period to the classical and early Christian period; and an intensified effort to transcend the modern mode of subjecthood, which he undertook at both a theoretical and practical level. The second major task Foucault set himself was the analysis of the systems of governmentality that have emerged within Western civilization for the suppression and regulation of this disruptive capacity for ecstatic

and related experiences. This brought him face-to-face with modernity's "sacralization of the modern experience of the self," that is, its hyper-rationalistic and state-mandated regulation of consciousness within an increasingly narrow range of socially and culturally sanctioned experiences (Bernauer, 1990:160). This led Foucault to a number of important new formulations, including his analyses of biopolitics, technologies of the self, and of governmentality in general.

Probably the most comprehensive and empirically informed deployment of Foucault's notion of governmentality is that undertaken by Nikolas Rose in his study of modern systems of 'governing the soul'. Rose discusses the role played by psychology, psychiatry and the other sciences of the 'psi-complex' of state power whose genealogy Foucault set out to trace. Their discourses, knowledges and conceptual systems, together with modes of analysis and explanation of human behaviour "have provided the means whereby human subjectivity and intersubjectivity could enter the calculations of the authorities" in the operation of the modern capitalist state (Rose, 1999:7). Thus, "subjective features of human life can become elements within understandings of the economy, the organization, the prison, the school, the factory and the labour market," but even more significantly for our present purposes:

> The human psyche itself has become a possible domain for systematic government in the pursuit of socio-political ends. Educate, cure, reform, punish - these are old imperatives no doubt. But the new vocabularies provided by the sciences of the psyche enable the aspirations of government to be articulated in terms of the knowledgeable management of the depths of the human soul. (Rose, 1999:7)

It was the genealogy of this deeply internalized form of governmentality that Foucault set out to trace in the final decade of his life, a quest that took him deeply into the history of early Christian thought.

This form of governmentality is required, Foucault believed, because the modern self is an historically contingent, inherently unstable construction existing in fundamental tension with various corporeal desires, forces, and potentialities that continuously threaten its dissolution and annihilation. This creates enormous problems of social order in an industrial civilization. Characteristically, Foucault sought to conceptualize this situation at the philosophical level. Reviewing the trajectory of his career, Foucault (1983:210) remarked that "since Kant, the role of philosophy is to prevent reason from going beyond the limits of what is given in experience." He explained how he had been freed from these constraints by the writings of Nietzsche, Blanchot, Klossowski and Bataille. On one hand, the philosophical task is:

> … to recapture the meaning of everyday experience in order to rediscover the sense in which the subject that I am is indeed responsible, in its transcendental function, for founding that experience together with its meanings. On the other hand, in Nietzsche, Bataille, and Blanchot, experience has the function of wrenching the subject from itself, of seeing to it that the subject is no longer

itself, or that it is brought to its annihilation or its dissolution. This is a project of desubjectivation. (Foucault, 2001:241)

In these writers, Foucault (1991:48) said he found "the theme of the 'limit-experiences' in which the subject reaches decomposition, leaves itself, at the limits of its own impossibility. All that had an essential value for me. It was the way out, the chance to free myself from certain traditional philosophical binds." Foucault (2001:241-2) goes on to emphasize that "the idea of a limit-experience that wrenches the subject from itself...explains the fact that...however erudite my books may be, I've always conceived of them as direct experiences aimed at pulling myself free of myself, at preventing me from being the same." Moreover, there was a practical imperative in this task, a need "to call into question the category of the subject, its supremacy, its foundational function," and indeed "such an operation would be meaningless if it remained limited to speculation. Calling the subject into question meant that one would have to experience something leading to its actual destruction, its decomposition, its explosion, its conversion into something else." (2001:247). Foucault was seeking out "experiences in which the subject might be able to dissociate from itself, sever the relation with itself, lose its identity" (2001:248). He elaborated upon this in his discussion of techniques of the self:

> In all societies [there are] techniques which permit individuals to effect, by their own means, a certain number of operations on their bodies, on the own souls, on their own thoughts, on their own conduct, and this in a manner so as to transform themselves, modify themselves, and so attain a certain state of perfection, of happiness, of purity, of supernatural power. (Foucault, 1999:162)

Coupled with the application of these techniques, Foucault discerned a particular type of knowledge (*savoir*) that involves the transformation of the subject through its act of knowing. Foucault (2001:256-7) identified a range of fields which engage "in a process of acquiring knowledge of a domain of objects, while at the same time they are constituting themselves as subjects with a fixed and determinate status." Aside from different branches of medicine, the economy, the law, etc., which he dealt with in his various books, Foucault emphasized that he "made an effort, in particular, to understand how man had transformed certain of these limit-experiences into objects of knowledge - madness, death, crime," and in all this work "it's always a question of limit-experiences and the history of truth" (2001:257).

Foucault is here seeking to give expression to a complex set of insights. Firstly, he is convinced that there is a realm of profound significance that hovers, as it were, on the fringe of human experience but which lies nonetheless beyond reason or, to put the matter another way, there exists a realm that reason is interdicted from exploring. Where reason does seek to grasp this realm, it does so in terms of madness, death, crime, mysticism, etc., which devalorize it and consign it to categories of

irrationality and pathology. Consequently, what is required is a new kind of thought that, "in relation to the interiority of our philosophical reflection and positivity of our knowledge, constitutes what in a phrase we might call 'thought of the outside'" (Foucault, 2000b:150). Secondly, Foucault was convinced that this realm was accessed via the body, that it was integrally related to human corporeality and that this, in part at least, had resulted in its subjugation, marginalization and governance via various technologies of the self. Thirdly, Foucault discerns an alternative tradition of philosophical thought represented by de Sade, Nietzsche, Bataille, Blanchot, etc., that valorizes both this realm and the corporeal in general and seeks literally to penetrate into it. This tradition seeks also to legitimize this realm as 'the Other of Reason'. Fourthly, Foucault recognizes that one of the aims, or at least the effects, of this latter quest is the radical destabilization of the subject, even its annihilation and dissolution into the corporeal. Fifthly, this destabilization creates a situation where the sole legitimate cite of knowledge, the subject, is "wrenched from itself" in the very act of knowing a core (but devalorized) dimension of its own very nature and capacities. It is within this vertiginous situation that Foucault locates his own inquiries, focussed, in the last years of his life, on the various technologies of the self and systems of governmentality that have emerged to control, regulate and stabilize this fundamental threat to reason, the subject and the social order built upon them.

Foucault's Final Project

It should be noted that Foucault's final search was not a totally new departure, nor was it unique to him. Firstly, it lay in continuity with his long-term interest in alternative states of consciousness, or, more accurately given the intensely corporeal dimension involved, with 'limit-experiences'. This interest had found expression in various forms and with differing emphases throughout Foucault's career. These range from his early speculations on the total freedom offered by the dream-state in *Dream and Existence* (1954), through the exploration of the 'Other of Reason' in *Madness and Civilization* (1961), the immersion in the thought of Bataille in "A Preface to Transgression" (1963), his celebration of Blanchot's 'thought of the outside' in 1966 and on to the explicit analysis of Christian mysticism in the years up to Foucault's death that we are concerned with in this paper. Secondly, Foucault's search was part of the "liquidation of the concept of the subject" (Critchley, 1996:25) that found expression in contemporary French thought, for example, in the decentring of the subject in Lacan's psychoanalysis; in Althusser's notion of the interpellation of the subject in ideology; in Derrida's notion that the subject is inscribed in language through the play of *différance*; and in Deleuze and Guattari's vision of the human being as pre-eminently a 'desiring machine'. Thirdly, we should note that Foucault's interest in limit-experiences, altered states of consciousness and the radical possibilities of the body reflected the broader counter-cultural movements of his time. It was, observed Lewis (1971:20), "an age of marginal mystical recrudescence," notable for its

fascination with drugs, mysticism and shamanistic activities. Foucault was, of course, a life-long user of various recreational drugs, using and writing in detail about the effects of LSD, opium, amphetamines, and amyl nitrate. He took LSD on a well-documented occasion in May 1975 that had a significant impact of his perception of his life's project (Miller, 1993:245ff; Macey, 1994:253-4; 339-40). As Macey (1994:340) comments, LSD "remained an occasional, intense delight" in the last decade of his life. It complemented various drugs that Foucault used in associated with sex and S/M activities, remarking that these "de-anatomize the sexual localization of pleasure...pills or cocaine allow you to explode and diffuse it throughout the body" (Macey, 1994:372-3). Finally, as just indicated, Foucault's work both led and reflected a widespread scholarly and popular concern with the body, its representation and regulation, partly driven by the feminist and gay movements, and involving other key figures included Maurice Merleau-Ponty, Norbert Elias, Pierre Bourdieu, and Bryan Turner. This broad concern fundamentally informed Foucault's final work.

Indeed, Foucault's concern with corporeality, embodiedness, 'the Other of Reason' and the dissolution of the subject was associated with scholarship of a quite concrete and practical kind, as can be seen from the annual course résumés that record Foucault's activities at the Collège de France through the 1970s after he took up his position there as Professor of History of Systems of Thought (Foucault, 2000a). These chart Foucault's progression from a concern with penal theories and institutions; the punitive society; psychiatric power; human abnormality; the defence and security of society; the birth of biopolitics; the nature of governmentality; the study of subjectivity and truth; and the hermeneutics of the subject. In his associated seminars, Foucault oversaw research into medico-legal practices and concepts; hospital design; transformations of psychiatric expert opinion; the category of 'the dangerous individual' in criminal psychiatry; the rise of the state and of the 'policy sciences' designed to enhance and ensure state power and social order; and the consequent rise of biopolitics as that type of governmentality that "tends to treat the 'population' as a mass of living and coexisting beings who present particular biological and pathological traits and who thus come under specific knowledges and technologies" (Foucault, 2000a:71). Subsequent seminar research was undertaken into such areas as civil and penal law, the right to life of children, and health policy. The focus on governmentality involved further research into the history and nature of liberal thought and ultimately into the formation of the notion of the self as the subject of governance. As these course résumés make clear, Foucault's analysis of the self and of its transcendence through limit-experiences took place within a context of quite concrete concerns with key aspects of contemporary social and political life.

Confessions of the Self

All of this work was informed by Foucault's ongoing study of the history of sexuality. It has been noted by various scholars and by Foucault himself, that his

three published volumes of his *History of Sexuality* departed radically from its original conception in the mid 1970s. Of the originally projected five volumes, only one, *The Will to Know* (1976), appeared prior to the last month of his life in June 1984. *The Will to Know* was a very slim book and was promoted as the methodological prologue to the series, appearing in English translation as *The History of Sexuality: An Introduction*. The remaining volumes were to have focussed on themes such as hysteria, perversion, child sexuality, and populations, but this plan was dropped and eventually *The Use of Pleasure* and *The Care of the Self* appeared, concerned with very different issues. These changes reflected fundamental re-orientations in Foucault's thinking. They also involved the withholding from publication of a volume in the series that had in fact been completed in the late 1970s, well before the latter two. This suppressed volume, 'Les Aveux de la chair' or 'Confessions of the Flesh' explored the prehistory of the modern experience of sexuality, focussing on attitudes towards sex in early Christianity. It had given Foucault a lot of trouble because it involved him moving from the modern era where he was intellectually at home to the early Christian period with which he was considerably less familiar. Moreover, he came to believe that he couldn't write authoritatively on this period until he'd mastered critical aspects of the Graeco-Roman world; it was this realization that set him upon the research that resulted in the final two volumes that were published.

Foucault himself explained this situation in some detail in 1984. His project had set out to analyse sexuality as an historically constituted experience and to explain why sexual behaviour and the activities and pleasures derived from it are objects of moral preoccupation. This involved establishing "the genealogy of the desiring subject, going back not merely to the beginnings of the Christian tradition but to ancient philosophy" (Eribon, 1991:320). Foucault came to believe that "this problematization of existence [was] linked to an ensemble of practices that might be called the 'arts of existence' or the 'techniques of self'." Each of his books developed aspects of this research, while the unpublished 'Les Aveux de la chair' explored "the experience of the flesh in the early centuries of Christianity and the role played by hermeneutics and the purifying process of deciphering desire" (Eribon, 1991:321). Such a hermeneutics was, of necessity, directed inwards and epitomized the shift from exteriority to interiority that marked the advent of Christianity. Foucault argued that pagan morality considered actions "only in their concrete realization, in their visible and manifest form, in their degree of conformity with rules, and in the light of opinion or with a view of the memory they leave behind them." Christian interiority, however, "is a particular mode of relationship with oneself, comprising precise forms of attention, concern, decipherment, verbalization, confession, self-accusation, struggle against temptation, renunciation, spiritual combat, and so on." (Foucault, 1992:63).

'Confessions of the Flesh' was described by Foucault's literary executor as the key to his entire series on the history of sexuality and indeed to all his work in the last eight years of his life (Eribon, 1991:324). Despite its unavailability, key themes from the book can be discerned from lectures and other material produced by Foucault

while he was working on the text and some of these have been recently collected and published (Foucault, 1999; Foucault, 2000a; Foucault, 2000b; Foucault, 2001). These reveal the extent to which Foucault's analysis of religion in the late 1970s was undertaken in direct continuity with his prior studies into penology, psychiatry and other instruments of state governmentality noted above. For example, while Foucault's course at the Collège de France in 1979-80 was 'On the Government of the Living', "the longest part of the course was devoted to the procedures of examination of souls and of confession in early Christianity" (Foucault, 2000a:81). As Foucault (2000a:81) explained in his résumé, the course "drew support from the analyses done the preceding years on the subject of 'government,' this notion being understood in the broad sense of techniques and procedures for directing human behaviour. Government...of souls and consciences, government of a household, of a state, or of oneself." Inside this general framework, Foucault and his students studied the problem of self-examination and confession." Specifically, Foucault asked:

> How is it that in Western Christian culture...government...demands...not only acts of obedience and submission but also 'acts of truth,' which have the peculiar requirement not only just that the subject tell the truth but that he tell the truth about himself, his faults, his desires, the state of the soul, and so on? How was a type of government...formed in which one is required not simply to obey *but to reveal what one is by stating it*?" (Foucault, 2000a:81 [emphasis added])

The subject takes shape through the very processes that seek the 'truth' about it. In exploring this issue, Foucault became convinced that there had been a fundamental shift in antiquity from a pagan ethics of exteriority to the Christian ethics of interiority that still dominates our thinking about the nature of the self, provides the basis for the confessional model of truth and underpins the psi-complex forms of governmentality noted above.

In connection with this analysis Foucault analysed the history of penitential practices and procedures through which consciences were examined in Christian monasteries. He was particularly interested in the requirement that one's inner-most self must be completely laid bare to the confessor. Foucault (2000:83) studied this in terms of John Cassian's *Conferences* and *Institutes of the Cenobites,* noting in particular three aspects: "the mode of dependence with respect to the elder or the teacher, the way of conducting the examination of one's own conscience, and the obligation to describe one's mental impulses in a formulation that aims to be exhaustive." He emphasized the extent of the shift this intense interiority involved when compared to the earlier philosophical schools of antiquity, and concluded that:

> Unconditional obedience, uninterrupted examination, and exhaustive confession form an ensemble with each element implying the other two; the verbal manifestation of the truth that hides in the depths of oneself appears as an indispensable component of the government of men by each other. (Foucault,

In exploring these themes it is notable that Foucault focused on John Cassian (360-435CE), a Christian contemplative who journeyed from the East via Egypt before founding a monastery and nunnery near Marseilles. As Peter Brown (1987:300) remarks, Cassian played a revolutionary role in the history of sexuality in the West: with him, sexuality became "a privileged sensor of the spiritual condition of the monk. Sexually based imaginings, the manifestation of sexual drives in dreams...were examined with a sensitivity unheard of in previous traditions of introspection." Certainly, "to see sexuality in this manner was a revolutionary change of viewpoint. From being regarded as a source of 'passions,' whose anomalous promptings might disrupt the harmony of the...person if triggered by objects of sexual desire, sexuality came to be treated as a symptom that betrayed other passions. It became the privileged window through which the monk could peer into the most private reaches of his soul." (Brown, 1987:300). Through rigorous interrogation sexuality laid open the self as a text to be read for its secret meanings.

Foucault was fascinated with this shift from exteriority to interiority, from a morality based on the person's subjugation to external regulation to a morality based on self-surveillance and self-subjugation through the most rigorous attention to the inner dynamics of the self. Within this model the self was conceived as a site of agonistic struggle between forces of good and evil manifested above all in sexual thoughts, desires and imaginings - one was at war with an Other who was one's own self. The dreaded presence of the Other within, "with its ruses and its power of illusion, was to be one of the essential traits of the Christian ethics of the flesh." (Foucault, 1992:68). In this fearful psychology, "the adversaries the individual had to combat were not just within him or close by; they were part of him...to struggle against 'the desires and the pleasures' was to cross swords with oneself." (Foucault, 1992:67-8). In this fashion, Christian ethics accomplished an epochal change in the valuation of the self, it became an unstable and treacherous site: the goal now was to empower the self in a war of subjugation and eventual annihilation against another aspect of itself, to drive the structures of power deeply into the soul.

The key to this empowerment was confession. For Foucault, it is fundamental to the history of the West that it was the confessional mode of governmentality that rose to dominance. The West has "become a singularly confessing society. The confession...plays a part in justice, medicine, education, family relationships, and love relations, in the most ordinary affairs of everyday life, and in the most solemn rites; one confesses one's crimes, one's sins, one's thoughts and desires...one goes about telling, with the greatest precision, whatever is most difficult to tell." (Foucault, 1979:59). Confession has become "a ritual of discourse in which the speaking subject is also the subject of the statement." It "unfolds within a power relationship" in which the subject faces an interlocutor who is at once "the authority who requires the

confession, prescribes and appreciates it and intervenes in order to judge, punish, forgive, console and reconcile" the subject to the power the interlocutor represents (1979:61-2). With its medicalization, the confessional mode and its outputs were transformed into therapeutic operations. The interpretation of sexuality shifts from the domain of sin, excess and transgression to the domain of the pathological, the unstable and the morbid. Over millennia, confession became "one of the West's most highly valued techniques for producing truth,"(Foucault, 1979:59) but it is a truth whose very production concretizes, entraps and embeds the subject in state-mandated expert-systems and the 'psi-complex' that epitomizes the contemporary form of governmentality (Rose, 1999).

Systems of Thought

In explaining this new focus of his final period, Foucault noted his previous pre-occupation with total institutions and their inhabitants. He conceded that previously he had placed too much emphasis on techniques of domination, and now felt the need to analyse specific 'techniques of the self' at the micro-political level and how they empowered individuals to operate on their own bodies, souls, consciousness and behaviour in order to transform themselves "and reach a certain state of perfection, of happiness, of purity, of supernatural power, and so on." (Foucault, 1997:181) He saw the need to identify how these technologies came to be embedded in systems of governmentality that prevailed over long periods of time. He had come to understand that "the self is nothing else than the historical correlation of the technologies built into our history," and that the crucial question we now face concerns "the positive foundation for the technologies of the self that we have been developing for centuries and centuries." (1997:230). What needs to be emphasized for our present purposes is not just Foucault's concern with the penetration into the core of the self of these technologies and the extent to which they actually give shape to the self they reveal - these are themes that one recognizes in Foucault's work in general. Rather, the point of greatest significance here is that Foucault felt he had to go back more than 2000 years to begin his analysis; ie., the logic of his intellectual development through the 1970s propelled him from an initial concern with penology, state power and bio-politics to an eventual concern with Greek and Roman ethical teachings on the self with the ultimate view of completing his study of early Christianity "and the role played by hermeneutics and the purifying process of deciphering desire," in the construction of the dominant form of governmentality in the West (Eribon, 1991:321).

In considering this fact one is drawn to a fuller appreciation of the significance of Foucault's choice for the name of his chair at the Collège de France. As Professor of History of Systems of Thought, Foucault sought to identify and explore large-scale structures of thought, and despite his later concern with 'discourses' and regional 'knowledges' covering specific fields of the human sciences he never abandoned this interest in comprehensive intellectual systems encompassing centuries of human

thought and practice. This is best demonstrated in *The Order of Things* (1966) with its division of the past 500 years of history into the Renaissance, Classical and Modern epistemes. Reflecting this long-term perspective, Foucault's lectures on early Christianity were later published with a set of studies by other hands that traced technologies of the self from the Greeks down through the Christian era, the Renaissance, Reformation, Rousseau and on to Freud (Martin et.al. 1988).

Other scholars have taken up this type of project. One example is the multi-volume *History of Private Life* edited by Philippe Ariès, Paul Veyne and others who were much influenced by Foucault. Another major recent contribution to this project of long-term analysis is that of Philip Mellor and Chris Shilling, whose book *Reforming the Body: Religion, Community, and Modernity* (1997) follows Foucault's lead in exploring the successive modes of embodiment informing religious and cultural life from the middle ages to the present. They identify the 'Medieval body', which was characterized by an immersion in the sensory world that fundamentally informed the way in which the Church related to the faithful; this was followed by the 'Protestant body' of early modernity, which saw a shift from sensuous to cognitive modes of engaging the world, with an emphasis on discipline; and now, more recently, the 'Late modern body' which is baroque in its confusion of discipline and control with sensuousness and abandon. The present era is characterized by a frequently intense anxiety and ambivalence about bodily pleasures and the perceived threat of disease, defilement and degeneration, and seeks to overcome this through ever-widening systems of governmentality of the body.

Conclusion

It is tempting to view the interest in Foucault found within religious studies as simply another shift in intellectual fashions or as an attempt to move important debates along by invoking a fertile new system of theory. The latter seems to be the view of many of the authors cited in the opening section of this paper, and one should not lightly discount their achievements. However, it is perhaps not an assessment with which Foucault himself would necessarily have agreed. While he might have applauded the progressive stances taken, he would have regretted his interpreters' unpreparedness properly to address their own embeddedness within the systems of governmentality that Foucault analyzes and critiques. This is nowhere better exemplified than in their tendencies towards a social constructionism that doesn't give adequate recognition to the complexities of Foucault's own analyses, their desire to read key issues in terms only of power, to view religion and mysticism only in terms of ideology or discourses of oppression, to simply invert the spirit/body dichotomy and to dissolve any possibility of the transcendent into an all-encompassing immanence that threatens to become little more than an essentialist materialism.

As the above discussion shows, there is a logic to Foucault's intellectual path in the last decade of his life. This reflects his attempts to comprehend humanity's

capacity for ecstatic, transgressive experience within the framework of a cultural history of various forms of governmentality. These he saw as directed towards the control and regulation of that transgressive capacity through the exploitation of various technologies of the self that shape the modern subject in terms of an ultimately nonviable hyper-rationalism of contemporary global capitalism. At the core of Foucault's project is an intense awareness of the fragility of the subject coupled with a desire - indeed, an anarchic wilfulness - to test or indeed fracture that fragility in order to access an illicit realm of experience beyond.

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