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Foucault and Religion

Spiritual Corporeality and Political Spirituality

Jeremy R. Carrette

Foucault and Religion

Jeremy Carrette's book opens new vistas in the dialogue between cultural criticism and religious thinking. His recovery of this forgotten religious strand in Foucault's writing enables us to better understand why some of Foucault's ideas have suffered such misinterpretation. While a major contribution to Foucault studies, Carrette's real achievement is to have performed a reading of Foucault in the spirit of Foucault and not from the limited perspective of an academic discipline. In rescuing Foucault's exercises in reconciling the bodily and the spiritual, Carrette's study advances the contemporary transformation in the field of religious understanding. He shows us Foucault's religious questions but his greatest success is that, in doing so, he gives new excitement and urgency to our own.

James Bernauer, Professor of Philosophy, Boston College

Foucault and Religion is the first major study to discuss the role of religion in the work of Michel Foucault. Carrette offers us a challenging new look at Foucault's work and addresses a religious dimension that has previously been neglected. We see that there is a complex religious sub-text which anticipates Foucault's infamous unpublished volume on the theme of Christianity.

Carrette argues that Foucault offers a twofold critique of Christianity by bringing the body and sexuality into religious practice and exploring a political spirituality of the self. He shows us that Foucault's creation of a body theology through the death of God reveals how religious beliefs reflect the sexual body. Carrette also questions the notion of a mystical archaeology and exposes the political technology of confession.

Anyone interested in understanding Foucault's thought in a new light will find this book a truly fascinating read.

Jeremy R. Carrette is Lecturer in Religious Studies at the University of Stirling. He is the editor of *Religion and Culture by Michel Foucault*.

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Spiritual corporality and political
spirituality

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To the memory of my father and mother

David Alan Carrette

1938–1989

Susan Carrette

1940–1998

Contents

<i>Preface</i>	ix
<i>Acknowledgements</i>	xiii
<i>Abbreviations of main texts by Foucault</i>	xvi
Introduction: Approaching Foucault's work on religion	1
1 Outline of Foucault's work and the question of religion	7
2 Silence and confession	25
3 Surrealism and the religious imagination	44
4 Male theology in the bedroom	63
5 Mystical archaeology	85
6 Body and belief	109
7 Towards a political spirituality	129
Conclusion: Religion after Foucault	142
<i>Notes</i>	153
<i>Bibliography</i>	183
<i>Index</i>	209

Preface

I am not where you are lying in wait for me, but over here, laughing at you? ... Do not ask me who I am and do not ask me to remain the same: leave it to our bureaucrats and our police to see that our papers are in order. At least spare us their morality when we write.

Foucault (1969a) *The Archaeology of Knowledge*, p. 17

Foucault wrote to be free but everywhere he is in chains. The slow process of locating, defining and appropriating him has turned man into icon and complex texts into soundbites. If Foucault was previously ‘over there’ laughing at those who put his papers in order (those who had tried to define and position him), he would now be in hysterics at the limits imposed on his texts. In the light of such a situation it is perhaps time to ask a whole new set of questions about the politics of reading Foucault. How can we, for example, read his texts outside the disciplinary regimes that have so far appropriated his work? How can we let his writings find a voice, a texture and a complexity outside the packaged and predictable interpretations of previous readings? How can we release him from the chains of commodified knowledges which highlight, reify and stereotype the complex folds of a thinker? How can we take his work out of the reductive introductions, the shortsighted dismissals, the obscure categories, the normalising labels and the rash generalisations? How can we begin to make his work as complex as the life of the man? How can we extend, elaborate and elucidate what has been hidden and marginalised in his work? How can we learn to read the richness of Foucault’s texts from the outside?

By raising these questions I am not suggesting that there is ‘real’ Foucault to be discovered in some original free-floating space, but rather suggesting that it is necessary to find an interdisciplinary and historically located reading which seeks to appreciate the breadth and complexity of his work. The questions I am posing become even more significant in the light of the publication of *Dits et écrits* (and the English translations arising from that work) and the publication of the Collège de France lectures. There is now a possibility to appreciate the intricate developments and subtle nuances of Foucault’s writing in a new light. Foucault scholarship, it would seem, is

about to enter a second wave of examination from the initial explosion of interest. As Arnold Davidson makes clear, the publication of *Dits et écrits* in 1994 ‘requires us to rethink the place of Foucault in twentieth-century intellectual life, allows us to rediscover the scope and importance of his work, and, above all, to recognise his continued philosophical force’.¹

To begin an examination of the religious nature of Foucault’s writing may appear to some to be yet another disciplinary appropriation, but this work is not so much about applying Foucault to themes in religion or theology as an attempt to examine the religious tropes of his writing in order to explore how he reflected upon and examined religious and theological ideas. This work seeks to enter the richness of Foucault’s texts, to retrieve and fold texts together, in order to discover a ‘religious question’ at the heart of his work. In this sense I am seeking to appreciate the diversity of his work by opening the space for thinking about a forgotten strand of his writing.

Those with an allegiance to the history or disciplinary parameters of philosophical analysis and those who have no appreciation of the interdisciplinary work of religion and cultural studies, which incorporates French literary ideas, continental philosophy, queer theory and feminism, will find this work grinds against their sanitised worlds. For I am not seeking to locate Foucault in the historical context of philosophy or theology – a task completed in the fragments of other studies.² This work does not seek to force Foucault into any disciplinary straitjacket but rather reads him ‘across disciplines’ by closely following the contours of his varied and dynamic work. My reading of Foucault seeks in this sense to follow his disruptive spirit rather than locate him in any single disciplinary context – something which will be of irritation to those in the Anglo-American tradition which attempts to force Foucault into restrictive disciplinary frames. This tension has been identified by Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, who states:

I would like to suggest that the United States approach to Foucault, on either side of the debate, is generally within the same side of a clash of epistemes. Both Gutting on the one hand and Dreyfus and Rabinow on the other like Foucault and want to save him for philosophy. But if an episteme can be taken, loosely, to be one level of social *pouvoir savoir*, then these colleagues seem to inhabit a rather different one from Foucault’s. One feels the tension of making Foucault fit for the consumption of American students and colleagues; the will to regularize him, normalize him, disciplinarize him.³

While I acknowledge the importance of mapping the intellectual trajectories of Foucault’s thinking in, for example, philosophy and the history of science, I do not seek to restrict or limit Foucault to any specific disciplinary frame in the exploration of the question of ‘religion’ – not least because, as Asad and King have illustrated, the concept of ‘religion’ is itself a Western discursive construct bound up with a series of power relations.⁴ My attempt

in this work is to read Foucault through the literary/religious/cultural tropes of his writing in order to unfold an understanding of 'religion' inside his work. My style is therefore more sympathetic to experimental ways of thinking found in avant-garde French writings than with the annals of traditional philosophy. In this sense my work at times plays into what Gerald Bruns saw as a 'refusal of philosophy' in the work of Blanchot.⁵ My attempt is therefore to read Foucault with the fluidity and disruption of such writers as Bataille and Blanchot in order to recover the forgotten fragments of his early 'religious' work.

My work also reacts against those thinkers who wish to bring Foucault and other post-structuralist writers into the conventions and traditions of Christian theology. While Foucault's work holds many possibilities for developing theological ideas and while there have been some very useful theological engagements with him, I separate these developments from his own project. I maintain that Foucault was an atheist and that his work on religion does not sustain a traditional theological worldview. The creative location of Foucault in the tradition of negative theology, for example, is a secondary theological redaction (interesting and valid in its own right) which does not find internal support in his work – except in the very general sense of his work being located within a European post-Christian intellectual context and the possibility of making analogical comparisons with his own linguistic strategies. What I seek to show is that Foucault's engagement with theological themes radically transforms and destabilises the field of religious understanding. Religion after Foucault can never be the same – there is a distinctive break with the historical location and understanding of religion.

Some may want to argue that my use of the word 'religion' in this work is vague and ambiguous, but it is precisely the unsettling of the certainty of the signifier 'religion' that informs Foucault's work. I wish to show that Foucault's writing questions the politics of religious experience and that he uses the words 'religion' and 'spirituality' in a way which disrupts traditional conceptions. The central force of my reading of Foucault is to show how what I call a 'spiritual corporality' and a 'political spirituality' undermine the traditional space of religion as understood in Western Christian society. After Foucault 'religion' is taken out of its privileged realm and brought into the body politic and into the heart of culture. This reading of religion will always be difficult to anyone hoping to use Foucault to support traditional religious belief and practice.

The bringing together of religious discourse and sexuality in the work of Foucault may also frustrate anyone who wishes to deny the influence of the Marquis de Sade and Georges Bataille on his thinking about religion. One anal(ytical) critic has gone as far as to describe my reflections on bodily fluids in relation to Foucault and body theology as 'tasteless'.⁶ Ironically such responses can only be described as anti-Foucauldian, in so far as they show no appreciation of Foucault's interest in the politics of sexual practice.

Foucault was challenging the boundaries of our thinking, he was disrupting the binary categories of our thought. My work seeks to take Foucault seriously, which means acknowledging sexually explicit acts, both heterosexual and homosexual, and linking them to religion, as Bataille, Sade and Foucault all do in their work. The style and structure of my work is often meant to be provocative and suggestive as a strategy to thinking differently about religion as it is developed in Foucault's work. The ideas may be challenging; they may offend a traditional theology and philosophy which wants to ignore the body, sexuality and queer politics. There are too many thinkers who want to neatly package religious knowledge into comfortable academic straitjackets, suppressing emotional uncertainties and interpersonal insecurities in intellectual and institutional structures which deny the political and erotic nature of religious discourse and practice.

I therefore read and write about Foucault not through the tradition of philosophy or Christian belief but as someone taking the fragments of his work on religion seriously. To read Foucault 'unplugged' will never be easy for anyone wanting to read him according to the restrictions of disciplinary knowledge. I seek in effect to follow a close textual and historically specific reading that allows space for a series of forgotten fragments of 'religious' discourse. I regard Foucault as someone challenging the boundaries of thought, someone who is strategically and politically questioning the entire process of the power-knowledge relations of disciplines. Religion after Foucault is never the same and clearly not everyone will be happy about this fact. Foucault was very much aware of the problematic responses to his writing when he stated:

I know how irritating it can be to treat discourses in terms not of the gentle, silent, intimate consciousness that is expressed in them, but of an obscure set of anonymous rules. How unpleasant it is to reveal the limitations and necessities of a practice where one is used to seeing, in all its pure transparency, the expression of genius and freedom.⁷

We need to read Foucault in the spirit of Foucault rather than in the constraints of disciplinary practice. This book is an attempt to show how Foucault started to think differently about religion.

Acknowledgements

Although this book is in all respects an academic study of the work of Michel Foucault, like Foucault, I see all my work as a reflection of my life. I do not accept the traditional academic dictum that ideas exist outside of the life that forms them, and, contrary to conventional academic practice, I wish to acknowledge the more personal context of my writing and thinking. If Foucault's *The Birth of the Clinic* was to some extent a reflection on his father's medical profession, this book is to some extent a personal response to the life of my father and his ordained ministry. The research for this work began three years after the death of my father and was a creative response to the now empty space of dialogue we had about theology, the politics of the church, and sexuality – it is a reflection of the male love between father and son. My father's pastoral ministry in the Church of England dealt with those on the boundaries of the church – with all those whom the church rejected or would prefer to ignore – his ministry, unlike Christian hypocrisy, was about inclusion and acceptance. This work owes its greatest debt to my father, whose life held the silent tensions of the body and belief; to recall the words of Patricia Dunker's novel on Foucault, he was 'the reader for whom I wrote' (*Hallucinating Foucault*, London: Serpent's Tail, 1996).

As the work began with my father's death, it ended a number of months after the death of my mother. There is no doubt that this work is also testimony to all the unspoken words of love, commitment, dedication and sacrifice that mothers make for their children – those, often unacknowledged, facts that make a life possible. I am indebted to my mother for all she has given to me and all she has made possible for my living and my life, for being there and silently holding.

If the outer contours of this work are shaped by my parents, the more specific details have been influenced by many friends and colleagues who have enriched my thinking over the years. I am above all indebted to my doctoral tutor Professor Grace Jantzen, who has become both colleague and friend. Grace has been a real inspiration through the research, writing and reshaping of this work. She has provided many invaluable critical reflections on various stages of its development. She has also encouraged me to keep believing in my project even as those from more traditional philosophical

backgrounds were unable to grasp its political challenge. Like Foucault, Grace has taught me the importance of intellectual courage.

I have also had the privilege to meet and develop many valuable friendships with people working in and around the area of Foucault scholarship. I am particularly indebted to James Bernauer SJ, who has provided enormous support during my research and opened many valuable opportunities to share my work with American audiences. Our friendship continues to be a source of much richness. I am also indebted to David Macey, whose generosity and encouragement from the beginning of my research has been so important. Both David Macey and Margaret Attack have been supportive in many ways not only in the work but during many visits to Leeds. It has also been a special delight to have discovered a friendship with David Halperin during a memorable American Academy of Religion conference in San Francisco. He has provided much needed encouragement, bringing equal measure of care and challenging insight to both my life and my work. The work would never have been possible in its present form without the generous help of my friend Richard Townsend. He opened up aspects of Foucault's texts and ideas beyond my own ability and shared many afternoons discussing French culture.

Working one's way through the Foucault archive is no easy task, and while the archive was kept in the Bibliothèque du Saulchoir I was grateful to Isabelle Seruzier for her help and assistance. Richard Lynch has also provided extremely valuable updates on the archive and indulged me in many discussions about Foucault's work. I am also grateful for comments and suggestions from Lois McNay and Kate Cooper, who provided a challenging context in which to think through the work and gave valuable insights on details of the text. Thanks are also due to Adrian Driscoll at Routledge for encouraging and supporting me in my work, and to Anna Gerber and the production team at Routledge for so efficiently bringing the book to light. In addition, I would like to thank Justin Dyer for his extremely valuable comments on the text and careful copy editing.

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Without doubt one of my greatest debts is to my friend and colleague at Stirling University, Richard King. He has followed this work closer than

anyone. We have shared many hours engaging in intellectual discussion, visiting book shops and simply laughing. It is a rare and valuable gift to have an intellectual companion who knows you better than you would at times wish to admit. I am also grateful for the support of my friend and acupuncturist Juli Stewart for holding my many fears. My colleagues at the University of Stirling have also been extremely helpful in providing time, space and encouragement to finish this project; I am particularly grateful to Keith Whitelam, Mary Keller and Yvonne McClymont for their support. I am also grateful to many friends and colleagues who have offered me so much in so many different ways, particularly Lucille Cairns, Roy Findlayson, Paul Fletcher, Darrian Gay, Hugh Pyper, Nick Royle, Peter Selby, Sonu Shamdasani, Mark Vernon and, more recently, my most precious 'Jewel' for all that is beyond words. Finally, the love of Tim, Ruth and Simon continues to be invaluable, and without them the last years would have been so much harder. They alone know the real sense of loss behind this work, and it is with them that I dedicate this book to our parents.

A shorter version of [chapter 4](#) appeared in a special issue of the *Bulletin of the John Rylands University Library of Manchester*, vol. 80, no. 3, 1998, pp. 215–33.

Abbreviations of main texts by Foucault

AK	<i>The Archaeology of Knowledge</i> [1969] (London: Routledge, 1991)
BC	<i>The Birth of the Clinic: An Archaeology of Medical Perception</i> [1963 rev.1972] (London: Routledge, 1991)
DP	<i>Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison</i> [1975] (London: Penguin, 1991)
HF	<i>Historie de la folie à l'âge classique</i> [1961] (Paris: Gallimard, 1972)
HS1	<i>The History of Sexuality, Volume 1: An Introduction</i> [1976] (London: Penguin, 1990)
HS2	<i>The Use of Pleasure: The History of Sexuality, Volume 2</i> [1984] (London: Penguin, 1992)
HS3	<i>The Care of the Self: The History of Sexuality, Volume 3</i> [1984] (London: Penguin, 1990)
MC	<i>Madness and Civilization: A History of Insanity in the Age of Reason</i> [1967] (London: Routledge, 1991)
OT	<i>The Order of Things: An Archaeology of the Human Sciences</i> [1966] (London: Routledge, 1991)
RR	<i>Death and the Labyrinth: The World of Raymond Roussel</i> [1963] (London: Athlone, 1987)

Introduction

Approaching Foucault's work on religion

It is hard for me to classify a form of research like my own within philosophy or within the human sciences. I could define it as an analysis of the cultural facts characterising our culture.

Foucault (1967c) 'Qui êtes-vous, professeur Foucault?', p. 605

The work of Michel Foucault (1926–84) has been explored in a variety of ways through the intellectual fields of philosophy, sociology, politics and literary studies, and his major contributions to these disciplines have been clearly articulated. However, the task of examining Foucault's work from the perspective of religion is far more complex. This is not only because he did not specifically work in the field but because religious studies (an area of study misunderstood and obscured in the secular academy) is an interdisciplinary subject incorporating aspects of philosophy, sociology, politics and literature. The current study of religion is now being more accurately articulated as part of an interdisciplinary study of cultures which, unlike the various modes of cultural studies, takes account of the historical and contemporary beliefs and practices of a given culture – it does not devalue or ignore the history and significance of religious beliefs and practices. Such an interdisciplinary approach finds Foucault's work particularly fascinating because religion is examined as part of his 'analysis of the cultural facts'. It is not a matter of separating religion from Foucault's philosophical or historical work; religion rather exists in the very fabric of such studies. Foucault takes account of religion in the shaping of Western knowledge, and it is this dimension which needs to be rescued. It is unfortunate that most readings of him have obliterated or marginalised the religious content in the narrow confines of their studies.

In examining the religious dimension of Foucault's writing it is important to identify the specific methodological approach of my own work in uncovering what I will call his 'religious question'. I am not, for example, seeking to apply Foucault's methodology to religion or theology, a task already advanced in the field of the sociology of religion.¹ My aim is rather to examine his work in order to uncover the religious sub-text of his writing prior to the emergence of his discussion of Christianity after 1976, and to

2 Introduction

show how his work changes in emphasis from this time. I am seeking to show that Foucault's late work on Christianity was not a sudden or abrupt turn to religion, but that he continually drew religion into his work – he recognised religion as a major part of the 'history of the present'.²

My approach to Foucault's religious question will be similar (though not identical) to Henry Levinson's seminal assessment of the religious implications of William James' work. Levinson described his work in the following way:

It is a book of philosophical reconstruction which shows James in his own world, not ours. I have made no effort to develop a comprehensive view of James's work as psychologist, philosopher, psychical researcher, literary critic, and public orator, though James made contributions to his study of religion in each of these roles. But I have tried to follow James's religious investigations wherever they led, even as they spilled over all sorts of proper disciplinary divisions that we make but that he did not.³

James, like Foucault, explored religion alongside a wider set of studies, and Levinson's attempt to bracket out the wider issues in James' study is a similar strategy to my own. The extraction of a religious sub-text from Foucault's work may appear fetishistic in nature, especially as Foucault was an acknowledged atheist.⁴ But this work seeks to uncover the religious fragments in order to highlight the underlying significance of a religious discourse and to show, as I have indicated, that it was a valid part of Foucault's 'analysis of the cultural facts'.⁵ While Foucault's 'religious question' only became a central focus in the late work, it always formed part of his wider studies and was consistently included as a significant part of the 'apparatus' (*dispositif*) of knowledge. However, by isolating the religious texts and trying to understand a separate discourse we are always in danger of distorting Foucault, even if he recommended such an approach in relation to Nietzsche.⁶ This work is an attempt to take Foucault's marginal reflections on religion seriously in order to show how they radically challenge traditional religious thinking.

This work, as Levinson notes in relation to his own 'adventure' with James, may appear 'untidy', because it follows 'surprising turns', involves 'subplots' and holds 'unanswered questions'.⁷ This is particularly true when exploring Foucault's 'religious question' because he offered no systematic examination of religious themes, or for that matter any other such subject.

Working in such a fragmented landscape means that there is much scope for secondary elaboration, and this highlights once again the dangers of developing imaginary religious worlds from Foucault's work. In order to guard against such excesses my methodology will be primarily textual. Foucault's writing could be, and has been, critically examined and developed from the perspective of the history of religions and theology, but I do *not*

seek to develop substantially any of these approaches.⁸ My aim is to read Foucault with Foucault, to read the religious strands of his texts alongside each other in order to establish the underlying religious questions hidden in his work. It is to juxtapose and interconnect a whole series of statements about religious ideas and to organise, evaluate and describe the themes held in such fragments. My aim is to 'fold' Foucault's texts upon each other, to establish some coherence and order in the religious ideas held at the margins. Such an exercise is comparable to Gilles Deleuze's commentary on Foucault which describes the 'folds' in Foucault's work, where the 'interiority' of thought is seen as a doubling of what is outside of thought.⁹ The 'religious question' in this sense is part of the 'unthought' of Foucault's work. My work aims to shape an 'inside' (an interiority) of his work with the 'outside' (the unthought). It is to explore the 'folds' of his texts in order to reconstruct a 'religious question'. I seek to read the multiple strands of his religious sub-text back on each other, to find Foucault's own 'religious question'.

I will of course introduce other critical methodologies into this textual fabric, but these will not form my main apparatus of inquiry. Thus, for example, I will utilise a number of secondary historical and feminist critiques to illuminate Foucault's writing, but my aim is always to create a space to read his 'religious question' through his own texts rather than consistently examine or outline other critiques to their full extent. This work will therefore isolate and bring together the fragments of Foucault's religious sub-text. From the earliest references in the 1950s and 1960s on the role of religious institutions in the history of madness, through the selective comments in his literary period and the discourse on the death of God, to the more substantial discussion of confession from 1976 till his death, I will attempt to carefully construct his 'religious question' in a way previously unexplored.

The principal aim of this inter-textual reading of Foucault's work, as I have already stated, is to rescue the early strands of his religious sub-text as standing alongside the later and more overt concerns he had with Christianity. I will hope to demonstrate that the later fascination with early Christian history arises out of and complements earlier concerns with religion. This weighting towards the early Foucault is based on two determining factors: first, the 'religious question' in his late work has by virtue of its more overt nature received greater attention in Foucault studies; and, second, the focus on his late work has primarily been concerned, alongside the work of Peter Brown, with the value of his work for understanding the church in late antiquity and has in consequence ignored the critical perspectives which align it with the earlier reflections on religion.¹⁰ I am therefore concerned principally not about the validity of Foucault's reading of religion and theology, but about the way he 'problematizes' religious thinking in a philosophical critique of religious ontology.

This work therefore sets out to reveal the underlying religious sub-text in

4 Introduction

Foucault's early work in terms of a critique of religious thinking which is, I shall argue, carried forward into the later studies of Christianity in a distinctively different form. I am in effect arguing that there is a single critique of religion in Foucault which emerges in the early work but which shifts in the later work due to a change of emphasis in his approach to religion. My work therefore is mapping a single critique of religion with two distinct edges or forms. I describe these two critiques as a 'spiritual corporality' and a 'political spirituality' by grouping together statements from different periods of Foucault's work, the former emerging in the early work of the 1960s and the latter emerging post-1976. My argument is that these two aspects of Foucault's religious sub-text are mutually dependent and reveal not so much different critiques of religion, as a single interdependent critique of religion. It could therefore be argued that 'spiritual corporality' and 'political spirituality' are applicable to all Foucault's work and that the division is merely one of emphasis.¹¹

Outline of the book

In this book I will follow a number of stages of argumentation. I will first (chapter 1) provide an outline of Foucault's work, drawing attention to those aspects of his work that explore religious themes. Those familiar with Foucault's writings will obviously be able to move easily through this section, although it does seek to highlight the religious and theological themes that have been overlooked in other studies. In chapter 2 I orientate the entire study by drawing a theoretical division between 'silence' and 'speech' from Foucault's 1976 work *The History of Sexuality: An Introduction*. This division between silence and speech forms the theoretical lynchpin of my reading of Foucault. It reveals the watershed between the two aspects or dimensions of his religious critique: 'spiritual corporality' (a critique of the silencing powers of religion) and 'political spirituality' (a critique of religious authority in the demand for confession). It is in this sense that I will use 1976 as the division between the notion of early and late work in Foucault. I will demonstrate that Foucault's sub-textual concern with religion prior to 1976 is preoccupied with extrapolating the silenced parts of religion, and that after 1976 he is concerned with religious utterances. In this book I will seek to show how these two aspects of his work form a single religious critique in the same way that he sees silence and speech to be indivisible.

After outlining the theoretical basis of my discussion a substantial part of the work will plot the basis of what I have referred to as Foucault's 'spiritual corporality'. The idea of a 'spiritual corporality' is unfolded through an exploration of Foucault's surrealist and avant-garde background, which I argue is the inspirational source of the 'religious question'. I refer to a 'spiritual corporality' rather than a 'corporeality' because the former indicates *only* 'of the body', as opposed to the latter, which implies body in opposition

to ‘the spiritual or intangible’.¹² The idea of ‘spiritual corporality’ will be developed by creating a series of textual graftings or ‘folds’ with Foucault’s religious sub-texts. By bringing together a series of textual fragments I will set out how Foucault’s early work can be seen as holding a critique of religion in the form of a ‘spiritual corporality’. I will develop this in three separate stages. I will first entertain the question of a ‘religious problem’ in Foucault’s work in relation to his background in surrealism and show to what extent he suspends and questions ‘religious’ ideas (chapter 3). I will then in a second stage show how his critical suspension of the ‘spiritual’ is relocated in the ‘corporal’ through the work of the Marquis de Sade and the notion of the death of God (chapter 4). I will also argue at this point that any discussion of the body must address the question of gender and seek to show how Foucault’s work holds a specifically male religious dimension. In a final stage I will examine Foucault’s *The Archaeology of Knowledge* in order to reinforce how his work opposes traditional religious ontology (chapter 5). It is my aim in this chapter to show how Foucault’s work rejects models of religious transcendence and opens the way for models of religious immanence.

Once I have established Foucault’s idea of a ‘spiritual corporality’ and his opposition to traditional religious thinking, I will then show how in the mid-1970s his ‘religious question’ faces a number of tensions and show how it gradually changes in its emphasis. I will argue that in *Discipline and Punish* there is a fundamental tension in his ‘religious question’ caused by the binary opposition between belief and practice (chapter 6). It is at this point that Foucault begins to submerge his ‘spiritual corporality’ and starts to develop a different emphasis in his discussion of religion in the form of a ‘political spirituality’. I will show how he shifts towards a political concern with religion after 1976 (chapter 7). Finally, I will return to my main argument and show how Foucault’s work holds a single critique of religion in the two ideas of ‘spiritual corporality’ and ‘political spirituality’. I will reiterate that as Foucault sees ‘silence’ and ‘speech’ as inseparable, so the notions of ‘spiritual corporality’ and ‘political spirituality’ are inseparable. My aim is to show how Foucault’s work holds a single critique of Christianity with two interrelated dimensions. After Foucault, religion is radically transformed, and in the conclusion I will briefly outline what I see as the distinctive challenges he offers to religious and theological thinking.

The idea of a ‘religious question’

It will already be apparent that the signifier ‘religion’ is a problematic feature of this study, and before exploring Foucault’s texts in detail it is important to demarcate the boundaries of the ‘religious question’ I am suggesting surrounds his work. First, we must constantly bear in mind that Foucault does not provide a distinctive and separate discussion of religion or Christianity. His work on religion often occurs through tangents and

6 Introduction

oblique associations, where 'religion' and 'Christianity' are selectively introduced in more detailed studies of madness, the avant-garde, language, prisons, sexuality and governmentality. Second, there is also a certain amount of slippage between the concepts of 'religion', 'theology', 'Christianity' and 'spirituality'. Sometimes these terms appear to be synonymous. However, Foucault generally uses the term 'religion' as a kind of overall phenomenological term to refer to any institutionalised faith tradition, though this predominantly means institutionalised Christianity. The term 'spirituality' in a similar fashion appears to refer to any religious faith, but is used, as we shall see, to avoid the word 'religion' and strategically disrupt traditional religious meaning.¹³ Foucault's use of the term 'theology' remains exclusively in the Christian tradition; and the references to Christianity always imply an exclusively white, male, Western tradition. In order to anchor my own discussion I will follow this very general framework of terminology, where 'religion' refers to the overall category of institutionalised religious phenomena and 'theology' to the Christian tradition. While it is necessary to locate the terminology for discussion, it is important to remember that the traditional meaning behind these terms is often critically suspended.

The aim of presenting a 'question' around Foucault's allusions to 'religion' is to hold the ambiguity and uncertainty of this referent within his own work. This work seeks to present and demarcate a series of 'religious' and 'theological' questions within his writings, which often seem to have little relationship to each other, but, as will become clear, are part of a wider set of 'force relations' (power) which challenge the coherence of the religious and theological 'subject'. I am seeking in this sense to follow Foucault's own response to surrealism in 1963 by suggesting that there '*may be* a religious question' oscillating in his work, but the coordinates of such a discussion will be radically altered from their traditional contours in the philosophy of religion.¹⁴

The alteration in traditional religious meaning is brought about by repositioning 'religion' in the space of the body and the politics of the subject. Religion, theology and spirituality are in consequence detached and dislocated from a transcendent order and become strategies which shape, control and dictate the patterns of human experience. The 'truth' of religious discourse is in effect taken out of the binary opposition between spirit and matter and rewritten in terms of the dynamic of power-knowledge and embodiment. Each stage of this work seeks to uncover the sub-textual movements in Foucault's writing which bring about this reorganisation and critique of 'religious' meaning. What I am suggesting is that Foucault's 'religious question' is found in part, like Foucault himself, in the act of its 'disappearance'.

1 Outline of Foucault's work and the question of religion

Religious discourse, juridical and therapeutic as well as, in some ways, political discourse are all barely dissociable from the functioning of a ritual that determines the individual properties and agreed roles of the speakers.

Foucault (1970a) 'The Discourse on Language', p. 225

The legacy of Foucault continues to take many twists and turns since his death. On the one hand his work has been condemned as lacking historical accuracy and obscuring philosophical 'truth', while on the other it has been extolled as providing one of the sharpest critiques of Western thought. His private life has been sensationalised in biography and his work held up along with Derrida, Barthes, Irigaray and Lacan in the mythology of the post-modern. It is perhaps, as Foucault declared in 1981, disguised under the pseudonym of 'Maurice Florence', 'doubtless too early to assess the break introduced by Michel Foucault'.¹

The contours of 'the break' are in part already determined by Foucault's cultural context in the French academic elite: educated at the prestigious *École Normale Supérieure* in Paris, then through a variety of academic posts in Europe and North Africa, and his arrival in 1970 to the Chair in the History of Systems of Thought at the *Collège de France*. But Foucault was not content to exist in the isolation of the academy. His work sought to engage in the politics of the asylum, the prison and the regimes of power which attempted to normalize and control. Foucault provided a social analysis which engaged in the intellectual and political struggles of his time; from the French educational structures, the treatment of prisoners, the plight of political refugees, to his support for solidarity in Poland, there was a wider engagement in the protests and battles for social justice. Towards the end of his life he was actively involved in the struggle to find new ways of expressing his gay identity and uncovering the dynamics of sexual politics, a register that arguably determines the entire enterprise of his work.²

Foucault's 'break' was also in part a response to the changing role of the intellectual in an ever-shifting political world. He was part of an intellectual 'event' and a wave of critical theory which disrupted the dominant discourses of Western rationalism and opened awkward spaces which

8 *Outline of Foucault's work*

remain unresolved and displaced. He was a writer who broke the mould of post-war French thought by challenging the landscape of phenomenology, Marxism and existentialism; a thinker who moved between, in and through traditional academic boundaries, causing anxiety to the Anglo-Saxon disciplinary straitjackets of philosophy, history, literary studies and psychology. Foucault's 'break' was to unfold a new geography of thought, an unfamiliar terrain, which was to unsettle the map of contemporary Western thinking. We encounter Foucault in texts which 'dissolve', 'explode' and 'collapse', in texts which encourage revolt.³ As the opening lines of his inaugural lecture at the Collège de France make clear, Foucault is found in his 'disappearances'; he is not simply found in the certitudes of historical fragments and philosophical calculation but in the 'enigmatic gesture', in the underground passages, in the silences, in the unthought, in the spaces of the Other, and, as Certeau so poignantly reveals, in the space of laughter.⁴ Such a style creates what Bove called a 'problematic of reception'.⁵ It presents the paradox of reading Foucault according to the categories of knowledge he so radically questioned.⁶

In order to understand the 'break introduced by Michel Foucault' it is necessary to begin this study by providing an initial outline of his major works. This is particularly important in a work which seeks to explore the sub-textual dimensions of his writing. If we are to understand the context of Foucault's religious thinking, we need to establish the relationship of these ideas to his main texts. In this first chapter I will not seek to wrestle with Foucault's works to find a style which will do justice to the individual force of his ideas, but rather present the broad scope of his thinking in order to locate the religious dimension of his work. This outline will enable me to show how the contours of Foucault's 'analysis of the cultural facts' brush up against the question of religion. It will reveal how he continually made excursions into religious and theological themes. The unique contribution of this work is to take these religious fragments seriously and entertain a 'religious question' hidden in Foucault's writing.

Outline of Foucault's work

Reflecting on his work in 1978, Foucault represented himself as an 'experimenter' rather than a 'theorist'.⁷ This differentiation is significant in trying to outline Foucault's work because it reveals the way he develops a series of analyses which reshape the historical object or theme of study by adopting critical indexes in their presentation. Foucault does not formulate neat and consistent objects of knowledge; rather he recasts and redefines the framework of perception. In this respect he argued that he provided 'tools' to examine institutions, practices and concepts.⁸ His work seeks to show how knowledge (*savoir*) is shaped by a 'will', by a power, by disciplines and regimes. What Foucault exposed was the ways in which knowledge is controlled, limited and excluded. He revealed the politics of all forms of