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THE PAULINE ELLIPSIS IN FOUCAULT'S GENEALOGY OF CHRISTIANITY

Faith, what is that?
-Michel Foucault

Paul occupies a curious position in Michel Foucault's genealogy of Christianity. Though focused at first on the archaeology of modernity, Foucault's history of the present eventually dug as far as Greco-Roman and early Christian antiquity. His central target was pastoral power (both ecclesial and secular) and its technologies of confession and spiritual direction. He sought to uncover, prior and counter to the institutional production of obedient and confessing subjects of self-knowledge, spiritual exercises of ethical self-care. But though Foucault discussed numerous elements of Christian thought and practice—from Tertullian to Aquinas, from monasticism to the Counter-Reformation—the apostle Paul is hardly mentioned. The absence of this foundational missionary is remarkable for many reasons. It certainly stands out against the current discursive eruption promoting Paul's revolutionary character. What might be the implications of this submerged and delayed encounter between Foucault and Paul? A proper appreciation of the depth and complexity of Foucault's genealogy of Christianity will be required for us to recognize the productive ambivalence of this elliptical silence.

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Recent work in theory has been marked by intriguing discussions of early Christianity and in particular the epistles of Paul. As witnessed in thinkers such as Alain Badiou and Slavoj Žižek, this retrieval and indeed espousal of Christian thought is couched as an essential move for the revitalization of the stagnant left. A reconstructed Pauline mode of subjectivation enacts, they suggest, an indispensable rupture in the deadlocks of contemporary globalized capitalism. Badiou presents Paul as the founder of universalism, whose message is needed today in a world of ethnic particularism and relativist identity politics.¹ Žižek, similarly but not without disagreement, argues that Paul's violent theology of grace allows the subject to free itself from the perverse, self-perpetuating cycle of law and its sinful transgression, which he takes to describe today's hedonistic

¹ Alain Badiou, *Saint Paul: The Foundation of Universalism*, trans. Ray Brassier (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2003).

and distastefully tolerant consumerism. In his eagerness to rediscover the progressive potential in religion, he even argues that “to become a true dialectical materialist, one should go through the Christian experience.”² For others, too, Paul has become a crucial reference: for Jacob Taubes, as an antagonist of Roman power, and for Giorgio Agamben, as a messianic thinker of exception.³ Likewise, Antonio Negri and Michael Hardt’s aspiration for the autonomous production of the multitude (without the extraction of biopower and capitalism) is explicitly framed as a repetition of the creative political love witnessed in the early Christian ecclesia *contra* empire.⁴

This contemporary outbreak of zeal for the apostle contrasts markedly with the previous generation’s silence and criticism. Juxtaposing Jacques Derrida’s 1996 condemnation of Paul’s sexism and metaphysical logic of unveiling with a study that, only a decade later, parallels deconstruction and the epistles as reflections on justice, hospitality and the gift, presents us with a telling study in contrasts.⁵ There are of course exceptions to this characterisation, but it seems clear that the current figure of Paul as militant hero and herald of the event is alien to the mainstays of poststructuralist critique. Certainly, as we will see, the majority of studies that approach Paul from a Foucauldian perspective have been chiefly suspicious of the power he wielded and installed. While these and other early uses of French theory in the field of biblical studies most often took the form of political critique, we find the dominant objective of today’s theoretical readings of the Bible to be the recovery of a radical politics. What is interesting is the link between these two shifts: the return to Paul is often articulated as precisely that which allows one to move beyond the postmodern impasse, with its twin evils of deconstruction and historicism, and particularly its perceived closure of political change. The deployment of Paul is an essential move in the post-poststructuralism of thinkers like Badiou, Žižek and Negri. The extent to which they are able to appreciate Pauline universalism or Christian love is, it would seem, the extent to which they are able to surpass the postmodern thinkers of difference.

We need not entirely reject the direction of this work to question the way it is framed. That philosophers might, at a critical historical juncture, seek inspiration from a return to the origins of Christianity is neither surprising nor new. For a

² Slavoj Žižek, *The Puppet and the Dwarf: The Perverse Core of Christianity* (Cambridge & London: The MIT Press, 2003), 6.

³ Jacob Taubes, *The Political Theology of Paul*, trans. Dana Hollander (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2004); Giorgio Agamben, *The Time That Remains: A Commentary on the Letter to the Romans*, trans. Patricia Dailey (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2005).

⁴ Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri, *Empire* (Cambridge & London: Harvard University Press, 2000). Compare, for example, Richard A. Horsley (ed.), *Paul and Empire: Religion and Power in Roman Imperial Society* (Harrisburg: Trinity Press International, 1997).

⁵ Jacques Derrida, “A Silkworm of One’s Own (Points of View Stitched on the Other Veil)” in Gil Anidjar (ed.), *Acts of Religion* (New York & London: Routledge, 2002), 309-55. Theodore W. Jennings, Jr., *Reading Derrida/Thinking Paul: On Justice* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2006).

thinker to take up the Pauline epistles in order to articulate central elements of his system is, in fact, a perennial gesture of philosophy. As Ward Blanton has shown, ostensibly secularist philosophers from Kant to Heidegger have read the Bible as a means of articulating their own post-Christian proposals. In Blanton's reading, "Every depiction of Christian origins doubles as an articulation of modern academic and social hierarchies"⁶ in which certain schools of thought gain advantage over their rivals by reading their own theoretical preferences into the all-too-compliant Christian archive. As he shows, originary Christianity is the perpetual battleground of modern scholarship, whose antagonists find the Pauline gestures eminently useful in the execution of their own oppositions.

This Pauline game thus has a long pedigree, even if its latest phase might seem to exhibit a certain exceptional intensity. That these political Bible readings are being purveyed by a group of avowed atheists is only to be expected: Paul has been an enduring first-rank ally of those seeking to overcome "religion" (a fact of no little consequence for today's related debates about secularism). Indeed, he proves a lasting resource against the co-opting of this 'return to religion' for confessional purposes: witness Alain Badiou's shrewd repetition of Galatians 2:16 when confronted with precisely this question: "The world cannot be divided into the religious and the non-religious."⁷ It is the Pauline formula of universal subtraction from the specificities of cultural identity that Badiou wishes to repeat in the twenty-first century—a "generic procedure" that he articulates through a systematic reading of the epistles that evacuates their mythological core (i.e. belief in the resurrection). This philosophical formalism by which Paul becomes stoutly 'our contemporary' has proved difficult for the guild of biblical scholars, given both their historical-critical lineage and their more recent engagement with postmodern theory.⁸ But against the imperative to contextualize, the irruption of the Badiouian Event or the Žižekian/Lacanian Real is presented as the means of escaping the dead-end of historicism itself—thereby once more surpassing the flaws of their predecessors such as Foucault. The wager of these latter-day readers of the correspondent they insist on calling a "Saint" is that it is their way of reading him—schematic, atheological, philosophical, political, combative, contemporary—that remains most true to Paul himself.

Amid such reiterations of Paul, there would seem to be little room for the so-called "historicism" Foucault, who uncovered the omnipresence of power in our all-too-Christian modernity before seeking alternative practices of the self in Greco-Roman philosophy. It seems that for Foucault, Paul could only be an historical object in the genealogy of the subject—certainly not a contemporary, who uncannily delivers much-needed political missives. Indeed, Foucault's near-complete silence on matters Pauline has not prevented others from slotting the apostle—along with the discourses of power and authority exercised in his first-

⁶ Ward Blanton, *Displacing Christian Origins: Philosophy, Secularity, and the New Testament* (Chicago & London: University of Chicago Press, 2007), 168.

⁷ Adam S. Miller, "Universal Truths and the Question of Religion: An Interview with Alain Badiou," *Journal of Philosophy and Scripture*, 3:1 (Fall 2005), 38-42.

⁸ See, for example, John D. Caputo and Linda Martin Alcoff (eds.), *St. Paul Among the Philosophers* (Bloomington & Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 2009).

century community forming activities— cleanly into the genealogy of pastoral power. I will seek to complicate this picture with some reflections on the rather elliptical place of Paul in Foucault’s genealogies—not only of the ‘desiring man’ that constrains our subjectivity, but of the critical attitude with which we might resist this inheritance.

For all that, we should not allow the current discussion to overdetermine our reading of Foucault’s relationship to Paul, and the possible implications of this pairing. Not only can the work of Foucault, one of the most influential figures in contemporary scholarship, aid in understanding Paul himself, both as our historical precursor and our contemporary; but also, reflexively, this profoundly multiple figure is essential to the assessment of Foucault’s genealogy of Christianity, which is an essential and underappreciated element of his work as a whole. Independently of recent debates and trends, these are important questions in themselves. Foucault constantly returned, over many years, to an interrogation of the Christian subject. Moreover, his last years were devoted to the elaboration of a unique reading of the philosophical traditions that make up one essential element of what biblical critics have endlessly mapped as Paul’s “context.”⁹ Insofar as the question of the parting of the waters between Hellenistic and Christian morality—as it effects modernity—is as crucial to Foucault’s work as it was to Nietzsche’s, the import of this conjunction could hardly be greater, or Foucault’s silence more deafening. However, the relevance of Foucault to Paul, and vice versa, has in the main been rejected or obscured. In large part, this is due the extent to which Foucault’s genealogy of Christianity has been inadequately understood.

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To take just one representative example from the current debate, Žižek writes in *The Fragile Absolute* of “Foucault’s thesis that psychoanalysis is the last, conclusive term in the confessional mode of discourse that began with early Christianity.”¹⁰ This typical summary is, as I will show, an extreme simplification of Foucault’s genealogy of Christianity, reducing a complex engagement to a straightforward narrative and thereby enabling its hasty refutation. But in addition to being thoroughly un-genealogical in the historical identity it assumes Foucault to be positing, it also situates Foucault as irrelevant to the renewed engagement with Paul and the radical materialist (anti-confessional, quasi-psychoanalytic) core of Christianity. Such a summary dismissal, which is repeated in varying ways throughout Žižek’s work, is only to be expected of the prominent Lacanian, given Foucault’s somewhat ambivalent critique of psychoanalysis.¹¹ But it is offered amid what is overall a sporadic but

⁹ See, for example, Michel Foucault, *The Hermeneutics of the Subject: Lectures at the Collège de France, 1981-1982*, ed. Frédéric Gros, trans. Graham Burchell (New York: Picador, 2005). Especially once the full series of lectures is published, a comparison is demanded to such work as Troels Engberg-Pedersen, *Paul and the Stoics* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 2000).

¹⁰ Slavoj Žižek, *The Fragile Absolute: or, Why is the Christian Legacy Worth Fighting For?* (London & New York: Verso, 2000).

¹¹ This refusal of what he sees as Foucault’s reduction of psychoanalysis to confession is present as early as Slavoj Žižek, *The Indivisible Remainder: An Essay on Schelling and*

persistent rejection of Foucault's potential challenge to Žižek's thought, which is increasingly depicted as a materialist theology and Marxist politics centered on a interpretation of Paul. Žižek's emphasis on Pauline love as an authentic revolutionary act is explicitly posed against the stagnancy of postmodern deconstructionism and historicism; indeed, it has recently been argued that it is most clearly the work of Foucault that Žižek takes us "beyond."¹²

Žižek's criticisms of Foucault are often tied up with his theological categories. His regular comments on the utopian naivety of Foucault's desire-less, self-caring subject, as opposed to the psychoanalytic "barred subject" constituted by a primordial lack, have explicit theological overtones: the Lacanian subject is situated after the Fall, opposed to which "Foucault's Greece and Rome 'before the Fall' (into sexuality-guilt-confession) are purely phantasmic entities."¹³ At one point Žižek aligns the contrast between Foucault and Lacan to that between Erasmus and Luther, distinguishing the humanism of each former figure from the latter's authentically Protestant "identification of man to God's excrement—what we have here is the opposition between a harmonious work of art and the queer remainder which sticks out."¹⁴ Foucault's self-caring subject is, for Žižek, as mythical as Eden and inevitably punctured by contact with the Real.

Such theological oppositions, implicit in his writings from the 90s, are borne out after his theological turn, as Žižek's engagement with Paul progresses. Building on Lacan's discussion of Romans 7 in the *Ethics*, as well as Badiou's influential reading of Paul, Žižek progressively develops his argument that it is only through Paul that one can break out of the deadlock between law and sin, prohibition and desire. On the way, he gets tangled in numerous problems—such as supercessionism in relation to the Jewish-Christian difference, and a rather Catholic emphasis on love at the expense of grace¹⁵—but he is persistent (and even willing to go beyond Lacan) in his intuition that "this superego dialectic of the transgressive desire engendering guilt is *not* the ultimate horizon of Christianity: as Saint Paul makes clear, the Christian stance, at its most radical, involves precisely the suspension of the vicious cycle of Law and its transgressive desire."¹⁶ And it is this radical Christian stance that he believes is alien to Foucault's spirals of pleasure and power, and his conception of resistance as internal to the social system. Significantly, in a recent discussion

Related Matters (London & New York: Verso, 1996), 1-2. A more detailed exploration of this question of Foucault's relationship to psychoanalysis is forthcoming.

¹² Fabio Vighi and Heiko Feldner, *Žižek: Beyond Foucault* (Hounds Mills & New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007).

¹³ Slavoj Žižek, *The Plague of Fantasies* (London & New York: Verso, 1997), 14.

Interestingly, Žižek can only see Foucault's utopian gestures as regressive and impossible, while others such as Derrida and Agamben have identified in such moments a clear inheritance from Judeo-Christian messianism.

¹⁴ Slavoj Žižek, *Enjoy Your Symptom! Jacques Lacan in Hollywood and Out* (New York & London: Routledge, 1992), 179.

¹⁵ For a discussion of Žižek's developing engagement with theology, see Roland Boer, "The Conversion of Slavoj Žižek," in *Criticism of Heaven: On Marxism and Theology* (Chicago: Haymarket Books, 2009), 335-390.

¹⁶ Žižek, *The Fragile Absolute*, 143.

with biblical scholars who insist on contextualizing Paul in his Jewish and Hellenistic circumstances, Žižek perseveres in asserting the universal dimension of exceptional subjectivity as proclaimed by Paul.¹⁷ The terms of Žižek's response, which insists that any epochal context always opens on to the traumatic Real "outside" of history, are precisely those in which he had repeatedly rejected the allegation, based on "Foucauldian historicist premises," of the desiring subject's constructed contingency.¹⁸ The ultimate implication is that in his refusal of lack, the Real, and the death drive, what Foucault is ultimately (and futilely) avoiding is the authentic, materialist, Pauline subject of Christianity.

Of course, Žižek's objective is to refuse not Foucault's critique of the confessional subject, obliged to interpret and speak their inner truth as such, but rather its applicability to Lacanian psychoanalysis and/or (the authentic materialism of) Pauline Christianity. The implications of such distinctions for the relationship of Paul to Foucault, which Žižek does not draw out, can be read in relation to another of his telling parenthetical remarks. The passage comes in the midst of his discussion of Badiou's reading of Paul in *The Ticklish Subject*, where what is at issue is the mutual incitement of law and sin, "the prohibitory Law that generates the desire for its transgression" as described first by Paul (in Romans 7) and then by Lacan:

(The ironic point not to be missed here is that Foucault conceives of psychoanalysis as the final chain in the link that began with the Christian confessional mode of sexuality, irreducibly linking it to Law and guilt, while – at least in Badiou's reading – St Paul, the founding figure of Christianity, does the exact opposite: he endeavours to *break* the morbid link between Law and desire....)¹⁹

There is much that could be said about the ironies condensed into this parenthesis. The first is that this tension (in Foucault's language, between subjection and freedom) is, of course, internal to Christianity itself: as Nietzsche put it, apropos "the *tremendous question-mark* called Christianity," "one constructed the *Church* out of the antithesis to the *Gospel*."²⁰ Paul's relationship to the Christianity he helped found (confessional, pastoral or indeed secular) is more complex than is here assumed – it is often, indeed, subversive or even (as Jean-Luc Nancy has recently argued) deconstructive.²¹ Contrary to Žižek's simplification, this agonism is (as we will see) recognized in Foucault's genealogy of Christianity.

¹⁷ Caputo and Alcoff (eds.), *St. Paul among the Philosophers*, 178-80.

¹⁸ See, for example, Slavoj Žižek, *The Metastases of Enjoyment: Six Essays on Woman and Causality* (London & New York: Verso, 1994), 199.

¹⁹ Žižek, *The Ticklish Subject*, 152.

²⁰ Friedrich Nietzsche, *Twilight of the Idols/The Anti-Christ*, trans. R. J. Hollingdale (London: Penguin, 1990), §36, 160.

²¹ Jean-Luc Nancy, *Dis-Enclosure: The Deconstruction of Christianity*, trans. Bettina Bergo, Gabriel Malenfant, and Michael B. Smith (New York: Fordham University Press, 2008).

It would also be worth tracking the ultimate result of Žižek's encounter between Lacan and Paul. As the quoted passage goes on to say, "However, the crucial point for psychoanalysis here is: does psychoanalysis remain within the confines of this 'morbid' masochistic obsession with death ... ?"²² And if Žižek defended Lacan against Badiou and Paul in *The Ticklish Subject*, by the time of *The Puppet and the Dwarf* (that is, three exploratory 'theological' books later) he has come to fully embrace the Pauline break, even against his beloved Lacan: "Is not Christianity here, then, the very opposite of psychoanalysis?"²³ This development begs the question: does he ultimately concede the "Foucauldian" charge he has refused for so long? But that is another argument; for our purposes here, what is most interesting about this passage is how Žižek's own logic suggests the possibility of an alignment between Foucault and Paul. If, as Badiou and Žižek suggest, Paul seeks to free the subject from its subjection to guilt and authority—if, that is, Paul is anti-confessional—then he can not be simply positioned at the origin of the Christian apparatus Foucault describes. Indeed, in at least a minimal sense, he might even be seen as Foucault's ally—however little the latter came to realize this.

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Such a suggestion contrasts strongly to the picture offered in most Foucauldian work on Paul. Here, Paul seems often to be the "founding figure" of confessional and pastoral Christianity that Žižek believes Foucault takes him to be. Inspired by Foucault's genealogical period, this literature has described a Paul of power and authority, mimetically close to God, and ushering in a regime of regulated interiority. Elizabeth Castelli's *Imitating Paul* sought to highlight the question of power through a Foucauldian analysis of Paul's calls to imitation and unity (such as Corinthians 4:16: "I urge you, then, be imitators of me") as part of the prevailing discourse of *mimēsis* in antiquity.²⁴ Castelli criticized the Pauline exhortation to communal unity in which the harmony of order, identity and "sameness is valued above difference,"²⁵ which is deemed disunity and discord. Stephen Moore's *God's Gym* advanced a provocative analogy between, on the one hand, the exchange from Christ's crucifixion to subsequent faith practices, and on the other, the transformation from violent, spectacular punishments to hidden, reformatory penalties that Foucault traced in *Discipline and Punish*.²⁶ The move is from a motif of public and violent execution—those of Jesus the messiah on the cross, and of Damien the regicide on the gallows—to a motif of private and interior confession, in which one's every thought is watched over by an all-seeing authority. Through the striking parallel between these two movements from the external to internal operation of power, Moore paints a sinister picture of the Pauline development.

²² Žižek, *The Ticklish Subject*, 152.

²³ Žižek, *The Puppet and the Dwarf*, 170.

²⁴ Elizabeth A. Castelli, *Imitating Paul: A Discourse of Power* (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1991).

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 86.

²⁶ Stephen D. Moore, *God's Gym: Divine Male Bodies of the Bible* (New York & London: Routledge, 1996).

In these readings, the power and authority of Paul's ecclesia-building is abstracted from its sociological context as alternative communities to the *Imperium Romanum*. Subsequent theological and ecclesial history is overemphasized, wedding Paul too tightly to the pastoral power of later centuries and, indeed, even more anachronistically, to the modern panopticon—thereby perpetuating the common misreading of Foucault as painting a monolithic picture of inescapable power-relations.²⁷ Paul is situated, on Foucault's behalf, as the first element in his genealogy of pastoral power and confessional self-interpretation—a move that, I will show, simplifies the substance (and diminishes the potential) of his genealogy of Christianity.

Sandra Hack Polaski takes a more cautious approach, seeking to negotiate between the marginal locus of Paul's subversive activities and what she calls the "discourse of power" they employ.²⁸ Taking some distance from Castelli, and especially Moore, she recognizes the newness of the churches and the self-sacrificing weakness of the power appealed to, as well as the relatively constrained and yet complex influence Paul was actually capable of wielding. Exploring why "[c]harismatically endowed equality and Pauline authority co-exist in Paul's congregations,"²⁹ she recognizes the tension between Paul's self-effacement in relation to the gospel, and his claims to authority and charismatic hierarchy due to divine revelation. This uniqueness and complexity of Paul's situation, as definer and mediator of a universally and equally available grace (also central to Badiou) is well illustrated by Polaski. However, the insights thus gained by her use of Foucault—which, she states, "is intentionally *strategic* rather than *systematic*"³⁰—fall short of recognizing the potential significance of Paul for Foucault made visible by a more thorough exploration of the latter's work. Polaski's approach is (like others) predominantly influenced by Foucault's "middle," genealogical period and its concern with power, such that even "relationships between God and Paul ... and between the communities and God"³¹ are considered power relations (though power is somewhat strangely subsumed to the concept of discourse).³²

But this is to exclude what must be on the face of it Foucault's most relevant work for an encounter with Paul: his late, ethical inflection of this genealogical approach towards the problematics of the care of the self, ascetics and truth-telling in antiquity. Polaski quickly passes over the term *parrhesia* in Philemon, arguing that it does "not by itself indicate an alternative set of power relations"

²⁷ Such problems persist in more recent work, such as David M. Reis, "Surveillant Discipline: Panoptic Vision in Early Christian Self-Definition," *The Bible and Critical Theory*, 4:2 (2008), 23.1-23.21.

²⁸ Sandra Hack Polaski, *Paul and the Discourse of Power* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1999).

²⁹ Polaski, *Paul and the Discourse of Power*, 33.

³⁰ Ibid., 18.

³¹ Ibid., 23.

³² Polaski's emphasis on the "political, economic and familial metaphors" (64) used in Paul's "discourse of power" ought to be problematized by Foucault's overall insistence on discursive practice.

when considered to (somewhat hypocritically, it seems) justify Paul's "command," which is taken to indicate "a set of power relations based on established, unchallengeable authority of a legal or quasi-legal nature."³³ But this term would take on great importance in Foucault's final years, culminating in his final lecture at the Collège de France in which he specifically discussed the notion of *parrhesia* in the New Testament. Central to Foucault's late work is the attempt to distinguish subjectivation through truth from subjection through objectifying self-knowledge—a distinction entirely absent from the monotonous focus on discourses of power. Foucault's picture of *parrhesia* as a mode of truth-telling, in which one's speech matches one's life, ought to undermine Polaski's impression of Paul's claim to "great boldness to command" (Phil. 8) as "theoretical," "arbitrary" and "undemonstrated."³⁴ Overall, Foucault's exploration in these final years of self-subjectivation as an ascetic practice through which one produces a relative degree of autonomy and resistance, suggests an approach to Pauline modes of veridiction that would avoid their overwhelming reduction to power relations. As it is, the partial approach taken by Polaski, like those of Castelli and Moore, ultimately compounds difficulties in Foucault's thought that he had long left behind.

Halvor Moxnes' essay on the desiring body in Corinthians differs in that it at least foregrounds the relevance of Foucault's late ethical (and ancient) turn for the study of Paul. Moxnes makes the important observation that Foucault "compares the moral philosophers of the early Roman empire of the first two centuries with Christian writers from the fourth and fifth centuries, not with their contemporaries in earliest Christianity."³⁵ His reading of Paul on embodied masculine subjectivity in terms of *askesis* is an attempt to rectify this curious fact, and further studies in its wake are needed. But Moxnes, too, only delves partway into Foucault's work on Christianity, and thus attributes to Foucault the "not ... well founded" and "simplified position," skewed by a reliance on late antique and medieval sources, that "Christian ethics consisted in obedience towards a set of rules."³⁶ However, codification and juridification are only minor elements (and precisely historically situated) in Foucault's delineation of confession and pastoral power, and are certainly not the terms by which he distinguishes Christian ethics from those of "pagan" philosophy. Rather, as the conclusion to *The Care of the Self* clearly indicates, far from painting Christian morality as concerned with "rules," Foucault recognizes significant continuities between the austerity of pagan and Christian moral codes and rather seeks to bracket out this juridical dimension the better to isolate the ethical element of self-relation.³⁷ It is on this level that he wishes to compare Greek, Hellenistic and Christian technologies of the self, and that he charges the latter not simply with codification but, more distinctly, with privileging a hermeneutic technology of self-interpretation that objectifies the self (via authorized knowledge) in order to

³³ Ibid., 63.

³⁴ Ibid., 61; 62; 64.

³⁵ Halvor Moxnes, "Asceticism and Christian Identity in Antiquity: A Dialogue with Foucault and Paul," *Journal for the Study of the New Testament* 26:1 (2003): 3-29 (8).

³⁶ Ibid., 16.

³⁷ Michel Foucault, *The Care of the Self* (London: Penguin, 1990), 235-240.

renounce it. Even without the publication of *The Confessions of the Flesh*, this portrayal of Christianity is visible in negative in the second and third volumes of *The History of Sexuality*, is suggested in other texts of the time, and is (and will continue to be) further expanded—if also complicated—by the publication of his lectures. As Foucault’s references to late nineteenth-century debates in biblical studies attest,³⁸ he is well aware of the eminence of this question of the emergence of Christian morality, to which he conceives of his own genealogies as specifically demarcated contributions. He can hardly be said to have indicted Paul for the “Christian” techniques of the self later to emerge.

On the one hand, the Paul of many of these “postmodern” readings could hardly differ more from his radical successor of recent years. Castelli’s critique of Paul’s repression of difference through universal truth sits at the opposite pole to Badiou’s championing of his subtractive universalism. Moore’s suspicion of the early Christian insinuation of power into interior reform contrasts with Žižek’s espousal of authentic early Christian subjectivity. Such critical approaches are certainly not as wrongheaded as current trends might suggest; in a time of enthusiasm for a revolutionary Paul, prone to forget the violent history of Christian politics, analyses of the apparatuses of power that Paul helped make possible are worryingly necessary.³⁹ But for all the implications of the Pauline intervention, it should also be recognized as resistance to Empire and messianic renewal, and assessed in all its notorious and radical ambivalence—as both exclusive and universal, hierarchical and democratic—as well as its remarkable effectiveness. This task is not helped by the fact that what these so different approaches to Paul share—whether they wish to reject, accept or augment it—is an inadequate notion of Foucault’s genealogy of Christianity, and thus of how Paul might be situated within or outside of it.

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Foucault traced a series of spiralling incursions into the heart of Christianity, returning often to a “superb instrument of power” that obviously intrigued him greatly.⁴⁰ His early death and the non-publication of his book on Christianity have meant that the potential relevance of his work to debates over religion has not yet been fully articulated.⁴¹ Amid his problematizations of modern therapeutic apparatuses and ancient self-technologies, Christian techniques of subjection recur as a primary object of analysis; the practice of confession is, as Elden argues, the central target around which the mutations of *The History of*

³⁸ Ibid., 236.

³⁹ See, for example, Gil Anidjar, *The Jew, the Arab: A History of the Enemy* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2003).

⁴⁰ Jeremy R. Carrette, ed. *Religion and Culture by Michel Foucault* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1999), 107.

⁴¹ The groundwork for this engagement has been set by the work of Jeremy Carrette and James Bernauer. See Jeremy R. Carrette, *Foucault and Religion: Spiritual Corporality and Political spirituality* (London & New York: Routledge, 2000); James Bernauer and Jeremy Carrette, eds. *Michel Foucault and Theology: The Politics of Religious Experience* (Aldershot & Burlington: Ashgate, 2004).

Sexuality revolve.⁴² In lecture courses of the 1970s, he traced the technologies of obligatory confession and spiritual direction developed within the ecclesial apparatus of pastoral power. When he turned in the early 80s to ancient philosophy, it was the better to delineate the emergence of this pastorate, and its hermeneutic model of subjectivity. Indeed his teaching of this period, on spiritual exercises, the care of the self, and parrhesia, would culminate in the final (unpublished) lecture before his death with a return to Christian sources – this time including the Bible.

The genealogy of Christianity was thus a significant element in Foucault's work. It was brief, often gestural and schematic, at other times detailed; it was perpetually revised, altered in scale, period and methodology; and it was in parts abandoned and ultimately unfinished, left incomplete and restricted at the time of his death. It was also an element of his work about which, we might surmise, he felt particularly uncomfortable, causing dossiers to be destroyed and manuscripts to be embargoed. But it was, at the same time, a subject that persistently piqued his interest, bringing him to return, often at unforeseen length, to a religious milieu whose particular relevance must often have baffled his auditors. But Foucault understood that today's secular apparatuses of power and subjectification could only be grasped, and ultimately refused, through a rigorous excavation of their Christian descent.

This genealogy was deeply Nietzschean. It weeded out the shadows of God and his anthropological corollary, Man, that persisted despite their paired deaths. It traced the schemes of power by which various priestly figures preyed upon the bodies and souls of the lay multitude, from Catholic pastors to today's secular shepherds and spiritual directors: doctors, psychiatrists, criminologists, government ministers. It offered a critique of the ascetic ideal of will to knowledge, world denial and bodily renunciation through the articulation of broader practices of ascesis, conceived as the modification of the self in its relation to the truth, to others, and to oneself.

Foucault saw Christianity as the religion of the flesh, which devised the hermeneutics of the hidden (sexual, sinful) self and established (through pastoral practices of self-examination and guidance) "a link between total obedience, knowledge of oneself and confession to someone else."⁴³ This uniquely Christian apparatus of pastoral power played, for Foucault, a central role in the genealogy of modern sciences of sexuality and normalization, and indeed of the arts of government. Technologies of conduct such as confession and spiritual direction, refined within medieval Christendom and transformed since, were taken over by the modern human sciences and ultimately transferred to the broader population through a process of secularization better understood as Christianization-in-depth.

⁴² Stuart Elden, "The Problem of Confession: The Productive Failure of Foucault's *History of Sexuality*," *Journal for Cultural Research*, 9:1 (2005): 23-41.

⁴³ *Religion and Culture*, 143.

It is important to insist on the *genealogical* dimension of this work, with all the emphasis on historical contingency and dispersion, battle and resistance that this implies. It was not, that is, a linear narrative of identity from confession to the sciences of sex, from Christianity to modernity, or from Paul to pastoral power. Nor did it identify a uniquely Christian origin—in a figure such as Paul—as the moment of a “fall” into the evils of Christian subjectivity. It was precisely against such theological logic that Foucault identified numerous historical breaks and mutations, events and descents, points of emergence, intensification, expansion and consolidation, of the technologies of power and self that he was tracing. One of the most important thresholds was the institutionalization of cenobitic monasticism, which produced laboratories for the innovation of confessional and disciplinary techniques characterized by obedience, perpetual self-examination, and the obsessive problematization of fornication. Foucault also delineated numerous breaks and transitions within an overall shift in medieval Christian penance from the theatricality of *exomologesis* to the exhaustive verbal confession, controlled by the priesthood, of *exagoreusis*.⁴⁴ Also essential was the proliferation of spiritual direction and arts of government from the sixteenth century, and particularly the consolidation and expansion of priestly power in the Counter-Reformation Tridentine pastoral. It is particularly important to recognize and specify the transformations produced by modern scientific rationality, and the extent to which Foucault’s real targets—the objectifying human sciences of sexuality and abnormality, with their secular clerics—differ from the renunciative Christian experience of the flesh, the morality of which they medicalized and biologized under a governmental regime of normalization. Such internal and external Christian ruptures belie the simplistic narratives to which Foucault’s genealogy is commonly reduced.

Importantly, Foucault recognized these various breaks and thresholds as the outcomes of struggle, of the “war by other means” that constitutes the political domain. Foucault did not share Nietzsche’s scorn of the “sick” targeted by priestly power, but militated on behalf of those named sinner, mad, abnormal, pervert, hysterical, or delinquent, devoting his work to tracing their resistance. He saw the Church’s pastoral power as challenged by, and responding to, various modes of counter-conduct, from early Gnostic intoxications and anchoritic excesses, to medieval resistance in the form of asceticism, communities, mysticism, the interpretation of scripture, and eschatology, to later refusals such as the convulsions of the possessed.⁴⁵ That is, Foucault recognized elements of resistance to what he identified as pastoral power *within* Christianity itself. Moreover, he also situated his own critical attitude within a tradition that included not only Greco-Roman parrhesia and Enlightenment critique but these historically Christian modes of counter-conduct. As he put it in the important essay “What is Critique?,” where he offered a genealogy of his own critical

⁴⁴ Ibid., 154-7; 169-81.

⁴⁵ Michel Foucault, *Abnormal: Lectures at the Collège De France, 1974-1975*, trans. Graham Burchell (eds. Valerio Marchetti and Antonella Salomoni; New York: Picador, 2003); Michel Foucault, *Security, Territory, Population: Lectures at the Collège De France, 1977-78*, trans. Graham Burchell, eds. Michel Senellart et al. (Basingstoke & New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007).

method: "Let us say critique is biblical, historically."⁴⁶ Thus even if Foucault's search for alternatives to a renunciative, hermeneutic, pastoral "Christianity" might have come to focus on Greek and Hellenistic philosophy, other moments in his own work make clear that elements of Christian spirituality also offer valuable sites and models of resistance.

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If Christianity is a principal, if somewhat neglected, focus of Foucault's work, the Pauline epistles remain almost entirely absent. Foucault was mostly silent on biblical texts until his final Collège lecture on Cynic and early Christian *parrhesia*. His focus on politically efficacious apparatuses of power, and his avoidance of absolute origins, was such that he referred to the beginnings of Christianity in "the second and third centuries" and listed as "the first great Christian thinkers: Tertullian and Clement of Alexandria."⁴⁷ In one of his discussions with Dreyfus and Rabinow, Foucault remarked that he does not want to begin things back as far as Paul, and that in the genealogy of the hermeneutic self-scrutinizing subject, he finds Paul's letters to be a puzzling anomaly.⁴⁸ The influence of his French Catholic milieu can be witnessed in a remark from an informal interview: "Historically, what exists is the church. Faith, what is that? Religion is a political force."⁴⁹ This silence was also largely extended to those episodes where the Pauline legacy was most strongly reinvigorated: for example, while he often signaled an intention to discuss the Reformation in more detail, such gestures remained little more than provocative suggestions.⁵⁰ Paul thus occupies a rather ambiguous location in relation to the Christian pastoral power that Foucault identified. Indeed, insofar as Foucault claims, in delineating various counter-conducts to the pastorate, that "Christianity in its real pastoral organization is not an ascetic religion, it is not a religion of the community, it is not a mystical religion, it is not a religion of Scripture, and, of course, it is not an eschatological religion"⁵¹ – then the ascetic, apocalyptic, communitarian Paul, quoter and author of Scripture, can hardly be said to be "Christian" at all, at least in the meaning Foucault here gives to the term.

This constitutes an important break from his Nietzschean influence. While Nietzsche's grand polemic against Christianity included a fierce and ambivalent confrontation staged with the apostle, in Foucault's more local, detailed and specific forays, Paul was treated to a cool silence. Nietzsche singled out Paul as an exemplarily resentful and power-hungry priest: "*His requirement was power*; with Paul the priest again sought power – he could employ only those concepts,

⁴⁶ Michel Foucault, *The Politics of Truth*, ed. Sylvère Lotringer, trans. Lysa Hochroth and Catherine Porter (Los Angeles: Semiotext(e), 2007), 46.

⁴⁷ *Religion and Culture*, 125. Michel Foucault, *The Hermeneutics of the Subject: Lectures at the Collège de France, 1981-1982*, ed. Frédéric Gros, trans. Graham Burchell (New York: Picador, 2005), 81.

⁴⁸ "Discussion about books", 24 octobre 1980, C18(2). IMEC Archive, Caen. Accessed November 2006.

⁴⁹ *Religion and Culture*, 107.

⁵⁰ For example, Michel Foucault, *The Will to Knowledge: The History of Sexuality Vol. 1*, trans. Robert Hurley (London: Penguin Books, 1998), 21-4.

⁵¹ Foucault, *Security, Territory, Population*, 214.

teachings, symbols with which one tyrannizes over masses, forms herds.”⁵² Polaski quotes this passage, but is unable to determine if “Foucault shared these particular sentiments.”⁵³ As we have seen, others, whether they want to extend or refute it, seem more eager to assume that such (minus the venom and psychologism) is the implicit judgment or inevitable outcome of Foucault’s work. But as Arpad Szakolczai has argued on the basis of Foucault’s final lectures, insofar as Foucault’s works are “devoted to testing this hypothesis” of Nietzsche’s that Christianity itself was the religion of resentment and the ascetic ideal, they produced an answer that was “fundamentally negative: Christianity was originally the religion of charismatic prophets and parrhesiasts [such as Paul]. The problem thus becomes to identify ... the conditions of emergence of the ‘ascetic ideal’ within Christianity and its lasting effects,” which Foucault of course traced to the “Christian turn to monastic asceticism.”⁵⁴ That does not mean we can assume the contemporary, anti-Nietzschean flipside of a transparent translation of Pauline formulas into Foucauldian language. But we can at least recognize that in this space of an ambiguous and problematic silence lurks the possibility, in articulating and extending Foucault’s project, of seeking resources for “political spirituality” not only in Greco-Roman care of the self but at the very heart of Christian ascesis.

At least, we should not hurry to identify and lament a failure to engage with the core of Christianity. Foucault once remarked: “I don’t try to universalize what I say; conversely, what I don’t say isn’t meant to be thereby disqualified as being of no importance. My work takes place between unfinished abutments and anticipatory strings of dots.”⁵⁵ No one was more attuned to and frustrated by these infamous silences than Jacques Derrida, who lamented Foucault’s refusal to spell out (or confess) the nature of his inheritance from Heidegger (and similarly Lacan):

one might say that the spacing of this omission, of this blank silence ... is anything but the empty and inoperative sign of an absence. On the contrary, it *gives rise* or *gives the place* [donne lieu]; it marks out the place of the age. The dotted lines of a suspended writing *situate* with a formidable precision. No attention to the age or to the problem of the age should lose sight of this.⁵⁶

I do not want to suggest that Paul was a subterranean influence on Foucault in the manner of Heidegger, Lacan, or even Benjamin or Kierkegaard—though Paul’s own decisive impact on all these figures only serves to make these

⁵² Nietzsche, *The Anti-Christ*, §42, 167.

⁵³ Polaski, *Paul and the Discourse of Power*, 22n24.

⁵⁴ Arpad Szakolczai, *The Genesis of Modernity* (London & New York: Routledge, 2003), 240.

⁵⁵ Michel Foucault, “Questions of Method,” in *Power*, ed. James D. Faubion, trans. Robert Hurley et al. (London: Penguin Books, 2002), 223-238; 223.

⁵⁶ Jacques Derrida, “‘To Do Justice to Freud’: The History of Madness in the Age of Psychoanalysis,” *Resistances of Psychoanalysis* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1998), 70-118 (126n19).

elliptical, place-giving silences even more suggestive. If we take Foucault at his word that such unmarked domains might be nonetheless significant, we must recognize the evocative “string of dots” that lingers, between the “unfinished abutments” of his exploration of Hellenistic and Roman philosophy and his account of the later Church’s confessional regime, in the silently lurking figure of Paul. And in marking out the age of pastoral power, we would do well to contemplate the extent to which the Pauline ellipsis in Foucault’s genealogy of Christianity might, however indirectly, give the place to his critique of confessional power.

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