

## REVIEW

### **Michel Foucault, *Religion and Culture*, Selected and Edited by Jeremy R. Carrette (New York: Routledge, 1999).**

The complicated question of religion as it pertains to Foucault's work is often raised by scholars and students of Foucault. It asks both about Foucault's personal and scholarly relationship to religion. Though there are numerous references to religion in his published work, what is not present is an overt and systematic treatment of religion in relation to his philosophy. This has prompted many of his followers, as well as detractors, to assume and/or to argue that religion has no place in Foucault's post-structuralist thought in particular, and in post-structuralist thought in general. These scholars often read Foucault's notion of the Death of God (following Nietzsche), his emphasis on the contingency of the subject, and his opposition to meta-narratives as a sign of his rejection of religion as an analytical notion (following Marx).

Jeremy Carrette's *Religion and Culture* attempts to address these issues and to clarify Foucault's position as to the place of religion in his philosophical thought. As James Bernauer writes in the prologue, Carrette provokes students of Foucault to "challenge one another to risk the exploration of new terrain rather than just report their knowledge of the already mapped" (p. xi).

This volume is the first attempt to bring together various pieces that Foucault wrote from time to time that explicitly deal with issues of religion and theology. What is heartening is that the volume brings out not only Foucault's engagement with Christian theology, but also his attempt (albeit later in his academic life) to understand other religious traditions, especially how they work to bring about social change (e.g., the Islamic revolution in Iran: Chapter 10, pp. 131-134) and transform the self (e.g. the Zen way of life: Chapter 8, pp. 110-114). It should, however, be kept in mind that these are not Foucault's only explications of religion. As Carrette notes in his lengthy introduction (Prologue to a confession of the flesh, pp. 1-47), "there is in Foucault's work an important theological and a religious sub-text which remains unexamined and neglected" (pp. 2-3). *Religion and Culture* aims to correct this by bringing together "Foucault's engagement with religious themes outside the main corpus of his writings" (p.3).

Religion and Culture imaginatively divides Foucault's writings into three parts. These divisions not only map the trajectory of Foucault's interventions in and interrogations of religion in the context of discursive reality, they also juxtapose 'religion' and 'culture' in Foucauldian thought in order to "open up the trajectory of Foucault's religious thought—to provide an account of Foucault on religion and culture" (p.34).

The volume opens with a prologue by Jeremy Carrette that provides a sharp background which allows us to engage with Foucault's thoughts on religion and culture. Carrette not only brings out the religious sub-text in Foucault's work, but also highlights just how Foucault's work provides a multidimensional critique of religion by bringing sexuality and the body into his exploration of religion and theology. Carrette also highlights Foucault's attempt to explore a political spirituality of the self. Foucault, in this respect, not only shows how religion and theology engage with the sexual body, but also foregrounds the political technologies embedded in religious practices and questions such notions as mystical archaeology. Thus, in Foucault's work, religion is "always a subsidiary sub-category, a cultural deposit" that influences and informs his historical and philosophical interests. For him religion is part of the 'cultural conditions of knowledge' (p. 33). As Carrette writes, "Foucault's work directly questions the separation between religion and culture by including it within his 'analysis of the cultural facts' and later collapsing the division between religion and politics in an ethics of the self... Foucault's work can therefore be seen to move within a discursive space of 'religion and culture'—where one mutually informs the other" (p. 33).

What also comes out of this collection of Foucault's writings (like his other writings) is the issue of gender insensitivity and blindness. Foucauldian thought has often been seen as a continual contestation with feminist thought. Aware of this, Carrette attempts to put this continual contestation in perspective by raising the question of "how to read Foucault's work on religion in a gendered context?" How are ideas that Foucault formulates about religion inscribed with a gendered perspective? How far has Foucault been complicitous with the religious institutions that have silenced and abused women and distorted men? How do we read Foucault's texts on religion with an awareness of the politics of gender?" (p.7). According to Carrette, "while Foucault repressively omits to explore the position of women, his methodological stance creates the conceptual space to critique Foucault's own exclusion (p. 9).

What is most interesting about the essays in this volume is to see Foucault's own struggles and inner contestations as a scholar. These struggles are especially evident in the pieces on Klosowski, modern French fiction, and his own experience of non-Western religious traditions such as Zen and Islam. Here we see Foucault in dialogue with his own ideas about spirituality, religion, and the self. These contestations with the self are especially evident

in the pieces on Zen and Islam, where Foucault is confronted with traditions that have different epistemological bases from which changes in the social and the self can be brought about. These personal contestations tie in well with two of the most engaging and revealing pieces in the volume, 'Who are you, Professor Foucault' (Chapter 6, pp. 87-105) and 'On religion' (Chapter 7, pp. 106-109). The former is a 1967 interview of Foucault by P. Caruso, while the later is based on the transcription of conversations between Foucault and Thierry Voeltzel, a young hitchhiker. In these two pieces Foucault lays down the basis of his views on spirituality and religion from an extremely personal angle and provides insights into his contestations with his own demons. This is well supplemented by a touching and marvelous memoir by James Bernauer.

In all, this collection is a welcome addition to the corpus of Foucault's writings available to the Anglophone world. It is valuable in that it brings together for the first time many previously inaccessible pieces by Foucault that will be of interest and use not only to students of theology, but also to students and scholars who have interest in social change, the self, and the society at large.

Muhammad Ayaz Naseem, McGill University