

# Defining Foucault for the Study of Theology

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This article will attempt to overcome two difficulties in the study of Michel Foucault. The first difficulty is consistency, a notion vigorously resisted by Foucault. "Do not ask who I am," he tells his critics in the *Archaeology of Knowledge*, "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" (17). Foucault properly argues that his "archaeology" is not a "method." It is not intended to be something used consistently for all manner of questions. It is, rather, a way of "digging out" from questions a whole complex of relationships, uses of space, dynamics of power, techniques of truth which are by nature diversely arranged in any given field and which change by way of the perspective one has chosen to expose. Still, with the minor exception that I will subordinate genealogy to archaeology (distinctive yet complementary terms), a coherent picture of Foucault's archaeology can be presented.

The second difficulty to overcome is transporting Foucauldian analysis to the study of religion. There has been a proliferation of commentary on Foucault in the field of Christian theology, but so far much of it has been directed—with either approval or disbelief—at Foucault's chosen comments on the Fathers, Christianity and sex (see Clark 1988, 619ff; Payer 1985). There remains little study, apart from general

comments, of Foucauldian archaeology as a manner of analyzing the function of truth in religion. This question is deceptive; most theologians who refer to Foucault believe this is the kind of analysis they are doing. By a careful explication of Foucault's thought, I hope to define more specifically the theological significance of his work.

Three complementary words—archaeology, genealogy and fiction—are central to Foucault's analytical style (Foucault 1990, 2:11-12). In the introduction to the second volume *The History of Sexuality*, Foucault claims that archaeology enables the examination of the forms of various sexual practices while genealogy focuses on the truth claims arising out of these practices. He speaks of the two as different "dimensions," although the priority of archaeology is evident because the task of genealogy (examining claims formed by practice) is not possible without the prior identification of practices. For this reason, genealogy can be understood as one of the tools of archaeology, and archaeology (the term usually associated with Foucault) can be used to describe Foucault's analysis as a whole.

Foucault's archaeology has had the unfortunate appearance of a structuralist enterprise. Frequently he has been grouped among the likes of Jacques Lacan, Claude Lévi-Strauss and Roland Barthes. Foucault, however, denies using the methods of structuralism—he once called certain French commentators who persisted with this nomenclature "half-wits" (1973, xiv). Although certain affinities exist between Foucault's archaeological analysis and structuralism, several subtle but important differences can be discerned. While structuralism too has its nuances, its overriding theme is to examine meaning-functions within a system of coordinates. Thus A1, in a given system A, comports a specific ritual meaning. In structuralism, A1 can be broken up in such a manner as to reveal the entire sense of system A, i.e., the single element A1 codes system A. In this way structuralists pursue primal elements in an effort to display the whole nature of a coordinate social reality. Structuralists also assume that this method relays a universal substructure characteristic of all human societies, or, as I am saying, all meaning-functions. Naturally, societies can be different, meaning-events can be vastly dissimilar, but in these cases it is the arrangement of elements at question and not the workings of structure.

The archaeologist of culture has an entirely different supposition. For the archaeologist it is not a question of an element having its meaning within a structure or even a question of if or how elements compose that structure; rather, the archaeologist asks, how does a certain structure operate so as to make a certain element significant at all? How does structure A effect a certain group so that they notice A1, talk endlessly about it, or even worship it? Foucault's archaeological analysis is virtually the reverse of structuralism: there is no longer a question about universality and there is no longer a supposition about breaking open the secret depths of a given element. A structure, be it a society, a group, or more significantly a way of being such as "western" or "capitalist," is accepted as a given that is already working prior to the question concerning its elements. And all elements, however they function, are placed in positions of importance or non-importance by their coordinated relation to other ones, not by some opaque relation to a hidden meaning. Element A1 is important insofar as it relates to B1 which in turn is defined by C1 and so on. Archaeology supposes no universal meaning to any system or subsystem. Instead, one enters a field of language as if one were opening an archive and examining the arrangement of space by which reality is displayed across the surface of time.

The archaeological question is fundamentally how "the whole determines what can count even as a possible element" (Dreyfus and Rabinow 1983, 55). That which "counts" is usually called "knowledge." According to Foucault, there is an intimate relation between knowledge and power within a given system. In fact, Foucault describes certain ways of knowing as "power-effects" or "techniques of power" (1980, 127; 1979). If one is fundamentally concerned with a system and the effect of a system in highlighting particular elements, then one is concerned with the function of that system's power. Foucault focuses the problem by asking, "What rules of right are implemented [in a system] by the relations of power in the production of discourses of truth? Or alternatively, what type of power is susceptible of producing discourses of truth that in a society such as ours are endowed with such potent effects?" (1980, 93) Foucault does not understand power negatively as an inhibiting force but positively as a force of production. "Far from preventing knowledge," he says, "power produces it" (1980, 59). Each society (or system) has its peculiar "regime" of power, its active "mechanisms" that produce the

effect of knowledge. As a consequence, Foucault never poses the theoretical question, "What is the origin of power?" Power belongs to the already given and, as such, Foucault insists that one can only ask how to analyze it, how to display its effects and, if necessary, how to revolt against it.

It is at this point that genealogy can be introduced as the archaeologist's most effective tool. Genealogy is about descent. After having opened an archive, the archaeological task includes not only displaying power-effects within certain schematics of truth, but also the arrangement of power-effects as schemes break apart, shift and reconstitute themselves in revised or new forms. For example, consider the subject-matter of Foucault's first genealogical work, *Discipline and Punish*. In it he refers to the graphic account of the execution of Damians, who was found guilty of the attempted assassination of Louis XV in 1757. The account describes the malefactor's public execution complete with hot pincers used to tear the flesh, boiling sulphur and wax poured on the wounds, and Damien being drawn and quartered. Later, Foucault introduces the case of Fieschi, another would-be assassin, whose intended victim was Louis Phillipe, the bourgeois king who ruled from 1830 to 1848. The same crime was committed, but gone is the ritual of torture and the public festival of an execution. In the space of approximately one hundred years, what has happened? Genealogy in this manner examines the descent of punishment from one archive to another. It questions not what punishment is (identity), but how it is arranged (technique). What is at question is the disclosure of differences (Major-Poeltzl 1983, 36). To be exact, how did power work to arrange one cluster of elements as a ritual of public torture and another as a ritual of legal execution? Some might say that a "paradigm shift" has occurred, but that is not the point. Genealogy tries to expose, display and reveal fluctuations and arrangements. It seeks to comprehend the disciplining of space (1979, Part 3, 3).

This technique is the singular invention of Michel Foucault, and it is immediately evident that certain questions are no longer relevant. Firstly, there is no question about the origin of punishment. There is no mythic event, some primal singularity, at the heart of the matter. Functions of power merely persist, break apart and reform without reference to universal meaning, direction or purpose. Secondly, by avoiding a metaphysics of origin, genealogy holds no disposition to re-

construct archival elements by means of a retrospection from the present. This may well be Foucault's most important point: he is convinced that one must come before history as a foreigner searching for sense rather than as a tourist (so to speak) in quest of the familiar. Thirdly, by rendering the past foreign through descent rather than familiar through origin, genealogy is not concerned with systematic doctrines or universal ideas. These latter two betray the anti-metaphysical task and inadvertently function as apologies for contemporary power schemes.

Prior to raising some questions for Christian theology, it is necessary to discuss the third key word, fiction. This entails understanding the important Foucauldian term, "episteme." Foucault used the word fiction as early as 1963 to describe what he called "the sovereignty of the word" (Bellour 1992, 149). He was referring to the way language gives "name" to things and, as such, apportions their reality within discourse. But within only a few years he revised this essentially nominalist idea and began speaking of the "regime of the narrative." He describes discourse as an open field where words emerge twisted into relations of victories, confinements, persecutions and battles (Bellour 1992, 149). Fiction describes the function of power and the formation power is given by the clustering of words on a virtual field of combat. Only incidentally interested in which precise cluster is highlighted, and why, fiction is directed instead at expressing the order that is in operation. It is interested in the way the story is told. A certain propriety governs the configuration of every archive. (Propriety is the best word in English to display the sense of Foucault's "episteme.") The combination of effects, the operation of power, the battle of words all unfold on the propriety of the field that orders their function and directs their expression. Propriety makes this question important, that question credible, this matter the subject of a quest, and yet another matter a waste of time. The propriety of an archive is the way it networks its relations and plays out its battles. Propriety "... defines the conditions that make a controversy or problem possible" (Foucault 1973, 75). All of this is what Foucault means by episteme. An archive's episteme is its propriety. Foucault ably displays this point when he describes the classical period of modernity, otherwise known as the enlightenment, and the episteme of its expression. "If the western world," he explains, referring to the classical period,

did battle with itself in order to know whether life was nothing but movement or whether nature was sufficiently well ordered to prove the existence of God, it was because . . . the episteme of western culture had opened up an area to form a table over which it wandered endlessly . . . and we see the marks of this movement on the historical surface of the themes, controversies, problems, and preferences of opinion.” (1973, 75).

The description of genealogy and fiction comprise the component parts of what is generally called archaeology. Displayed are its elements, nuances and manner of use: enter the archive, discover the marks of its episteme, and witness the workings of power by which elements are clustered, rituals are enacted and priorities are set. The remaining difficulty is to understand what specific use archaeology has in the study of religion, and what questions does it raise for Christian theology?

The most outstanding feature of Foucault’s archaeology, at least from a theological point of view, is its non-teleological nature. Owen C. Thomas suggests that this presents a significant challenge: it is clear that “Foucault is undermining many of the ideas held dear by those who want to affirm ideas of continuity and development.” He further adds that Foucault questions any “ideological view of history which presupposes a deep origin, continuity and goal [for] the development of reason and consciousness” (Thomas 1988, 297). Thomas is, however, exaggerating when he states that Foucault’s critique is “undermining” dearly held ideological views of history: Foucault’s critique is not something theology has feigned from pursuing. For most of the twentieth century, philosophers and philosophical theologians have revised the nature of the word *telos* under a variety of paradigms. From process revisions of *telos* as a divine disposition toward openness to the “death of God” theology’s attempt to eclipse it, the evidence suggests that theology as a whole will not be panic-stricken by contemplating the loss of teleology.

If it is not principally the question of teleology that should be of concern, what about the credibility of systematic theology? It seems certain that the “history of ideas” approach to the Christian faith depends far too much on conceptions Foucault has rejected. The task of archaeology explicitly counters that of the systematic theologian, namely, to recount in as clear a fashion as possible, the essential idea or doctrine that remains the “same” despite its various expressions within different his-

torical contexts. Archaeology is not about, as Foucault explained, the task of rethinking “. . . the dispersion of history in the form of the same” or about isolating “. . . the new against a background of permanence” (1989, 21).

Philip Mellor has pursued this question by using Foucauldian analysis in comparative religion. He states that Foucault rejects the “totalizing character” of structuralism including its expression in religious contexts. The religious context would have to include Christian systematic theology insofar as this enterprise can be defined as one seeking “coherence” within a given religious tradition. Mellor, however, restricts the relevance of Foucault’s archaeology to merely that of yet another “analytical tool” that “may be useful.” In effect, he tries to make a “methodology” out of archaeology by highlighting its unique ability in tracing “. . . the development of different branches of discourse in terms of their relationship to each other and the points at which they diverge, all with reference to context and situation” (Mellor 1988, 492). But archaeology is not another methodology, nor can it be described as a “useful tool” of conditional advantage. Under such limitations, the purpose of archaeology is missed.

If reduced to an analytical tool, archaeology cannot offer anything new to theology. Even a cursory survey is convincing. Was not the question of discourse, context and situation already well-established by the Frankfurt School in the 1920s? Does not existentialism, perhaps the greatest hermeneutical key for many twentieth-century theologians, already include a radical affirmation of historicity and a radical rejection of “totalization” as an answer to any enquiry? One can also cite the influence of Martin Heidegger’s hermeneutics, Ludwig Wittgenstein’s logical positivism, and Wilhelm Dilthey’s historical relativity. Even Karl Rahner, in his *The Idea of Christianity*, had rejected nineteenth-century systematic theology and was experimenting with new options. As a simple analytical tool it is difficult to see how archaeology can provide theology with something it does not already have within its own boundaries.

This kind of exploration could continue by raising the problem of “tradition,” a key question David Chidester believes Foucault imports to religion (1986, 4). The result, however, produces the same response: where can we not find the critique of tradition as a “natural unity” already

actively pursued in theological circles? The point is that while religious thinkers have been quick to adapt Foucauldian-like questions, the significance of archaeology is rarely understood. Only Owen Thomas comes close when he states frankly that we “must await the archaeological and genealogical study of the history of Christianity” (1988, 299).

While the preceding questions are important and do indicate areas where Foucault could be useful, they still remain secondary and peripheral to the intent of Foucauldian archaeology. Foucault, in his various critiques of the western enterprise and his display of its episteme, seldom if ever issues a call for “revision.” Some commentators have complained that Foucault in fact indicates “no potential remedial action” in the course of his critique (Lyon 1991, 608). This is not Foucault’s problem, however, for it reflects a misunderstanding of his intent. Instead of offering solutions, David Chidester is right in suggesting that, as far as Foucault is concerned, our time is not one for new theories, explanations or paradigms (1986, 4). Though archaeological analysis cannot claim to be beyond these notions, it can claim, and indeed does claim, that these very things are its matter of study. Archaeology is not a paradigm but holds “paradigm” as its subject; archaeology is neither a “truth” nor attempts to be “true”; it makes the display and the function of truth its object of inquiry. As Foucault stated, “truth is to be understood as a system of ordered procedures for the production, regulation, distribution, circulation and operation of statements” (1980, 133). The question of revising a subject, a method, a world-view—the question of a “paradigm shift,” a “new theory,” a “breakthrough”—are all the subject rather than the aim of archaeology. The point is to ask by what means, under what regulations, as part of what “regime of truth,” does a paradigm exist? The point of archaeology is always one of fiction: it asks, what is the propriety of the archive? what is at work in the production of truth? how is the fiction operating? What theology needs is not yet another call for revision or some new analytical invention. This is not the time, as Foucault would suggest, for new theories. What is needed is not a structural shift but a display of how the theological structure is functioning. The “episteme” of theology must become a subject: more specifically, what is needed is an archaeology of God.

While it may be necessary to raise questions about teleology, doctrine and tradition, these questions have often side-tracked theo-



gians from seeing the point Foucault is actually making. The fact of a paradigm seems to make a far greater impression than the propriety of its functioning. The consequence is the failure to notice, as Foucault would put it, the dispersion of archival elements. Technologies of power (the simple techniques of fiction that highlight, analyze, classify and schematize truth within the boundaries of a discourse) studied independently of teleological motivation and historical continuity have therefore not been adequately displayed within the context of Christian history or the development of Christian doctrine.

When Thomas Torrence visited McGill in 1990, he claimed that if the “homoousia” was knocked out of the Nicene Creed, Christianity would fall to paganism. This constitutes a simple example of a technique of power. The word “fall” immediately isolates paganism as something other than, and inferior to, Christianity. The class in whose presence this statement was made had no objection, indeed no reaction, to this rather remarkable generalization. Here is a whole complex set of issues, practices, and beliefs that had been held for centuries in different cultures and forms by profoundly religious people. Here is tradition, ritual, commitment, ideals, community, visions, efforts, love—all the multiples of the mysterious and incomprehensible experience of being human—reduced to a word invented by a Roman emperor in CE 392. What is incredible, though, is not so much the statement but the power of the word. How could “paganism,” one of the greatest generalizations of history, reduce an audience to silence, give the impression of profundity, and be allowed to justify the superiority of Christianity? Why is the statement authoritarian? For Foucault it is a question of the dynamics of power actively producing an effect of truth within an operating fiction: an exclusion occurs, a reduction by the elements of a discourse that compose and coordinate a technique of power, by which space is appropriated. There is no room, in this instance, for the questioning of whether “paganism” was really all that bad? The parameters have been set for which a “truth” and a “foolishness” may exist only as opposites.

This example may be considered minor, but this does not lessen its significance. Torrence’s claim is not being examined for its merit as a “true” statement; rather the concern is to see how an example of Christian discourse operates, i.e., to display archaeology, not to prove or disprove his point. The question of its ultimacy (its teleological value) is sus-

pended. Its fictioning of the world is the matter at hand: how does, so far as this example may stand, the episteme of Christianity function in the production of truth? More importantly, how are its techniques used and by what means are these techniques judged acceptable? What is the function of power here? Of course a complete answer is complex, including an exploration of the setting of Christianity within the western episteme (and vice-versa) as well as a genealogy of Christ. Yet, the example can stand as a display of archaeology's intention. It proposes first and foremost a comprehension of truth as an effect of power before raising the question of its usefulness or its need of revision.

The temptation when studying Foucault is to take his archaeology as an invitation to reform theological practices or perhaps invent a new "system." This is understandable. The question of types of "non-teleological" theology are intriguing, a revision of the meaning and nature of "tradition" and "doctrine" is important. The problem is that such enterprises are not the Foucauldian question. Foucault, if he is to be taken seriously, calls for an archaeology of Christianity, and this concern is yet to be recognized as a legitimate project in theology.

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