

Autonomy, Religion, & Revolt in Foucault

Corey McCall

Southern Illinois University

Michel Foucault's work is often read as providing the reader little reason for hope. On this reading, contemporary human beings, caught within an implacable web of power relations, are left with few if any options for escape. Such a bleak reading does a disservice to Foucault because it disregards another and equally compelling dimension of his work. While it is undeniable that there are passages in Foucault that might lead one to believe that power produces subjects and binds them within an iron cage, for example in Foucault's portrayal of the disciplining of the modern subject presented in *Discipline and Punish*, a much different picture emerges when one takes into account the writings from the last period of Foucault's life, those writings associated with the (unfinished) History of Sexuality project.

Although it is true that for much of Foucault's writing life he wrote under the sign of Nietzsche's anti-Enlightenment destroyer of idols, another figure emerges from the shadows late in Foucault's work. Kant's influence becomes evident in late texts such as Foucault's "What is Enlightenment?," in which Foucault seeks to rehearse the question that Kant elaborates in his famous essay of 1784.¹ Another example of the inspiration Foucault derives from Kant and the Kantian conception of critique is present in Foucault's "What is Critique?" from 1978. However, Foucault's essays are not merely rehearsals of Kant's position: In both texts, Foucault seeks to rescue a version of critique that he believes has been

overlooked by Kant's inheritors. According to Foucault, the nineteenth century reception of Kant's critical project conceived of his project in narrow epistemological terms. Foucault seeks to retrieve a forgotten alternative understanding of critique, one that would align it less with a critique of what can be known and more with the question of what each individual might become.

Readers who disregard the critical dimension of Foucault's work also disregard the ambiguous place of religious discourse within it. Granted that for the most part, Foucault conceives religion in primarily negative terms, as a set of discourses and practices that govern subjects and do not allow them to govern themselves. Furthermore, in texts such as "Omnes et Singulatim," Foucault shows how the institution of the Christian practices of "pastoral power" paves the way for modern practices that seek to govern all conceivable aspects of living populations.² This is one way Foucault characterizes religion in "What is Critique":

"The Christian pastoral, or the Christian Church insofar as it deployed an activity that was precisely and specifically pastoral, developed this idea—unique, I believe, and completely foreign to ancient culture—that every individual, whatever his age or his status, from the beginning to the end of his life and down to the very details of his actions, ought to be governed and ought to let himself be governed, that is to say, be directed toward his salvation, by someone to whom he is bound in a total, and at the same time meticulous and detailed, relation of obedience."³

The rise of social sciences such as statistics and psychology serve to conceive each individual as the member of a population; such discourses largely serve the interests of the modern state through "individualizing" discourses and discourses and techniques that constitute the population as a governable one.

There is another characterization of religion present in Foucault that is

admittedly not as prevalent as his conception of religion as a set of utterly heteronomous practices that give rise to modern discourses of governmentality. This second, more positive characterization of religion lies in its capacity to contest these nascent forms of state control instituted during the modern period (which are the very forms of governmental control that Christianity helped foster). The first example I will elaborate in this paper is that of the sixteenth century Protestant Reformation, which sought to resist these emerging forms of “governing in its various domains: how to govern children, how to govern the poor, how to govern armies, how to govern different groups, cities, states, how to govern one’s own body, how to govern one’s own mind” (WC, 384). The Reformation presents a turn toward individual autonomy that presages Kant’s own elaboration of the question of autonomy. According to Foucault, the Reformation represents a Scriptural critique of emerging disciplinary discourses and practices.

The second example of critical religiosity Foucault elaborates is more problematic. In the late 1970’s, he praises the Iranian Revolution as a religious revolution. Although many of his pronouncements on events in Iran have proven to be false, it is interesting to contrast his characterization of the Iranian Revolution as a spiritual revolt that expressed the ultimate form of critique in which individuals are willing to forsake their individuality and lay down their lives in order to refuse forms of governmentality.

I begin by examining Foucault’s conception of critique. With this analysis in place, I seek in the second section to pose the question of the place of religion within Foucault’s texts. I proceed by interpreting the place of religious autonomy in Kant’s original answer to the question of Enlightenment in order to pose the question of autonomous religiosity in Foucault. If we take seriously Foucault’s criticism of Christianity as a set of irremediably heteronomous practices in which the

individual is subordinated to a spiritual teacher to whom she must confess everything, what are the implications for religious practice? On Foucault’s terms, is anything like an autonomous religiosity possible, or does this remain as problematic for Foucault as it was for Kant? Put more simply, what might religious discourse contribute to an aesthetics of (autonomous) existence?

Genealogy, Critique, and the Question of Religion

The clearest and most complete picture of Foucault’s conception of an aesthetics of existence emerges in the second volume of the History of Sexuality project, *The Use of Pleasure*. *The Use of Pleasure* depicts the Greek male aristocrat who is able to become autonomous and constitute himself independently of the heteronomous forces seeking to determine him. Foucault is clear that he is not entering upon this path of investigation out of a sense of nostalgia for what was or what might have been. We are not to look to the Greeks for the reasons the German Romantics once looked to them, as models to emulate or reasons to despair over the emerging conformism of modern society. Rather, according to Foucault, we look to the ancients in order to examine forms of autonomous existence that may have relevance for us today. Foucault only examines ancient practices of self-fashioning in order to awaken in his reader the possibility of autonomous existence and thereby provide his reader with a measure of hope for the future. We do not look to the Greeks in order to bemoan what might have been, but instead in order to see what might in fact become possible. Foucault returns to the Greeks in order to portray possibilities for autonomous existence that might prove relevant for us today, not so that we might be better informed regarding the past, for this would be nothing more than an arid scholasticism born solely of the will to know.⁴

Foucault explicitly criticizes such epistemological impulses in his essay “What

is Critique?" Here, he distinguishes two types of critique present in the Kantian project. The first is exclusively epistemological, and has been the prevalent appropriation of Kant's work down to the present. Two different examples of this idea of critique as epistemological critique present themselves in the form of Neo-Kantianism and in certain strains of contemporary analytic philosophy, but Foucault's own examples of epistemological critique are mainly drawn from nineteenth century positivism. Critique in its epistemological guise seeks to determine conditions for the possibility of true utterances in order to properly ground scientific discourse. For Foucault, such a narrow construal of critique disregards the most fruitful aspect of Kant's conception, critique as an explicitly political phenomenon that seeks to rediscover philosophy's original impulse. This impulse is present in the Socratic need to ask who one is in relation to others. Critique is the project the individual undertakes to fashion herself out of the very governmental relations seeking to determine her: Critique for Foucault is the practice of autonomy.

Concrete examples of such autonomy exist: Socrates provides one, as does Kant. The place of the intellectual becomes a question at this point, for the intellectual both performs such critical work upon herself and to help facilitate it in others through her words and deeds. As Foucault writes:

"I can't help but dream about a kind of criticism that would try not to judge but to bring an oeuvre, a book, a sentence, an idea to life; it would light fires, watch the grass grow, listen to the wind, and catch the sea foam in the breeze and scatter it. It would multiply not judgments but signs of existence; it would summon them, drag them from their sleep. Perhaps it would invent them sometimes—all the better. All the better. Criticism that hands down sentences sends me to sleep; I'd like a criticism of scintillating leaps of the imagination. It would not be sovereign or

dressed in red. It would bear the lightning of possible storms."⁵

The role of the intellectual is neither to pass nor to make judgments; the intellectual's function is neither epistemological nor moral. Rather, the intellectual's role is to point toward possibilities that have not yet been conceived. Imagining otherwise requires a disrespect of tradition, tradition as embodied in religious practices as well as in secular societies.

The disrespect for traditional hierarchies is an aspect of both imagining otherwise and genealogy. In addition, such disrespect requires a certain amount of fearlessness in the face of what might result from this critique of traditional hierarchies. However, one does not engage in critique as an end in itself: Critique only becomes possible if certain configurations of power and knowledge have become intolerable. Critique becomes a necessary response to existing relations of power and knowledge when individuals begin to hear themselves ask "How not to be governed *like that*, by that in the name of these principles, in view of such objectives and by the means of such methods, not like that, not for that, not by them?"⁶ This question is the counterpart to a question that for Foucault was posed during the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, that of government. According to Foucault, the Protestant Reformation presents a prominent example of the sixteenth century answer to the question of government. Martin Luther's gesture of critique toward the Church came at a time "when the governing of men was essentially a religious practice linked to the authority of a church, to the magisterium of Scripture, not wanting to be governed in that way was essentially a seeking in Scripture a relationship other than the one that was linked to the operating function of God's teaching."⁷ Although Luther's act was aimed at a particular type of religious authority and its specific practices, the intertwining of religious and secular authority at this point in history gives this act more than religious significance. It is a more general act of critique embodied in speech and writing,

critique in Scriptural terms. As Foucault writes, “from Wycliffe to Pierre Bayle, I believe that critique was developed in an important, but of course not exclusive part, in relation to Scripture.”

Intellectuals such as Luther, Socrates, and Kant must possess a certain amount of fearlessness in speaking critically. Foucault intends his series of lectures entitled *Fearless Speech* to be a genealogy of the critical attitude as characterized by Foucault’s portrayal of Kant in essays such as “What is Critique?” These lectures illuminate the ancient concept of *parrhesia*, in which the individual carries out the duty of telling the truth to those in power, despite that such truth-telling might mean her death.⁸ The thinker for Foucault must possess the means to make her views known. The critic must possess the courage to speak, and the determination not to be silenced. Certainly, the requisite courage varies and depends on the given situation. Within current American society for example, more courage may be required to speak out than might have been required several years ago. No matter the intellectual climate, the possibility of being silenced or (more benignly) ignored is ever-present. *Parrhesia* always includes the possibility of the death of the speaker, a possibility admittedly more real in ancient Greece than it is for most people today. For the ancients, *parrhesia* was an expression of freedom: One could only be free if one could speak the truth to the ruling classes, i.e. practice critique. *Parrhesia* according to Foucault is a key concept for contesting of reigning conditions, but it is also revelatory of the individual and presents a possible path toward autonomous existence. This means that the *parrhesiast’s* activity must go beyond outright refusal of societal conditions. The *parrhesiast* speaks out to contest certain configurations of knowledge and power that she has found to be unacceptable. Ultimately, the only way to silence the *parrhesiast* is to kill or imprison her. Although Foucault emphasizes ancient Greek sources of *parrhesia* in this series of lectures, many religious martyrs could serve

as examples of *parrhesia*, from those early Christians who opposed the Romans down to the present. Modern examples echoing this ancient conception are readily available as well. They include a host of political dissidents in Eastern Europe, the Far East, and South Africa, both known and unknown. Included among these modern *parrhesiasts* are individuals whose very religious identity provides the grounds for them to speak out against conditions in society, figures such as the Tibetan Dalai Lama or Archbishop Tutu of South Africa. These individuals speak out against oppressive regimes because their religious beliefs require that they do so.

Through their speech and deeds, such individuals provide an example for others and a hope that conditions might be changed. Such figures point toward the possibility of an autonomous existence deriving from religious faith. In the next section, I explore this possibility and contrast it with another possibility Foucault elaborates, that of religious revolt.

Foucault on Autonomy and Religious Revolution

For Foucault, religion in general and Christianity in particular poses difficulties for the project of autonomous self-fashioning, for an aesthetics of existence. In this section, I wish to investigate an aspect of Foucault’s relationship to religion not often investigated, which is the possibility of critique immanent within religious discourse, alluded to in the case of the Reformation above and present for Foucault in the example of the Iranian Revolution, which Foucault addresses in two essays on the Iranian revolution. In order to present this question of religious critique and revolution, I begin with a rehearsal of Kant’s position presented in his 1784 essay “What is Enlightenment?”

Kant’s essay is part of a newspaper exchange. Moses Mendelsohn put forward the initial answer to the question of Enlightenment, and Kant’s answer presents his own conception and initiates a dialogue with Mendelsohn’s earlier text. Kant begins

with his famous definition of Enlightenment as the demand for the departure from a “self-incurred immaturity.” One’s unenlightened immaturity is not due to a lack of knowledge but to a lack of resolve. Enlightenment requires courage, a courage not wholly unrelated to Foucault’s conception of *parrhesia*. However, Kant’s conception of enlightenment emphasizes institutional change, whereas Foucault’s presentation of the *parrhesiast* underscores the individual’s role in critiquing the present. In order to autonomously fashion one’s existence meaningfully for Foucault the individual must be willing to write and speak against intolerable conditions in the present, a task that is made much easier, as Kant notes, if institutions exist to foster this activity. This is at the root of Kant’s distinction between the public and private use of reason. For Kant, reason’s public employment is that of the scholar who writes and speaks before a public audience and speaks for everyone. That same individual might also employ reason in its private aspect, through her role within a state or institutional apparatus.

Religious institutions play a role in the process of Enlightenment, and they can either help or hinder it. Kant presents the example of the member of the clergy who has the private duty to speak in conformity with given institutional norms, but also has the duty to speak out against these very norms when employing reason in its public aspect, when such institutional norms hinder the possibility of Enlightenment for both her congregation and the wider public. In her former role, the minister serves as an agent of her particular institutional affiliation and is not permitted to speak freely, while in her latter guise she *must* speak freely as an individual and member of the enlightened public. For Kant, the public and universal employment of reason must be kept distinct from its employment within private institutional settings.

Foucault does not hew so strictly to the distinction between the private and public employment of reason that Kant outlines. Instead, Foucault examines religious discourse as a specific example of how

relations between power and knowledge become constituted and how they in turn constitute subjects. Christianity in particular interests him because he sees in the practices of the early Church mechanisms that will be expanded and intensified in order to administer individuals and populations. This is the predominant conception of Christianity present in Foucault’s writings. However, Foucault does not see religion as only a dangerous precursor to modern forms of governmentality. In addition, he sees religion as opening up spaces for critique. Oddly enough, we can begin to make sense of Foucault’s remark that the Reformation provides a critique of emerging forms of governmentality if we examine Foucault’s views of the Islamic revolution that toppled the Shah of Iran.

The idea that revolution expresses a secular sentiment against a hidebound traditional society that has become intolerable is a relatively recent one. Indeed, the idea is really only as old as the French Revolution.⁹ The American Revolution did not manifest the anticlericalism found within the French Revolution, mainly because religious life was not so intimately tied to the political life of the ruling elite in the American colonies as it was in pre-Revolutionary France. The Russian Revolution took up this anticlericalism, and it came to be understood that revolutions, despite the pain visited upon the masses, were ultimately for the good of them, because it is only through revolution that they could be free of the shackles of traditional religious and political life.

Foucault points out that such a conception of revolution as exclusively secular and wholly progressive supplants an older idea in which religion itself provides the vehicle for social change. Revolution represents the extreme of critique, and its status as a progressive force is of recent origin. As Foucault writes in “Useless to Revolt?”:

“If societies persist and live, that is, if the powers that be are not ‘utterly absolute,’ it is because, beyond all the submissions and

coercions, beyond the threats, the violence, and the intimidations, there is the possibility of that moment when life can no longer be bought, when the authorities can no longer do anything, and when, facing the gallows and the machine guns, people revolt. Because they are thus 'outside history' and in history, because everyone stakes his life, and his death on their possibility, one understands why uprisings have so easily found their expression and their drama in religious forms. Promises of the afterlife, time's renewal, anticipation of the savior or the empire of the last days, a reign of pure goodness—for centuries all this constituted, where the religious form allowed, not an ideological costume but the very way of experiencing revolts."¹⁰

This revolutionary aspect of religion unsettled the Romans during the time of Christ, and it unsettled both Church and political authorities in the doctrinal critiques that became the Reformation of the sixteenth century. More recently, it unsettled observers of the Iranian religious revolution as well.

Foucault was fascinated by events in Iran, for it seemed that what he was witnessing was a manifestation of a mythical general will. Prior to events in Iran, Foucault believed that such a phenomenon was a mere metaphysical abstraction on the order of, as he put it, God or the human soul.¹¹ It was thought to be something ineffable, a mere dream of political philosophers, and yet here it was: the general will as a manifestation of religious revolutionary zeal.

The Iranian revolution in its earliest stages, which Foucault is observing and commenting upon here, unites individuals and groups; it does not permit of factionalism. Foucault cites the example of Iranian Kurds who unite behind this general will by identifying themselves with Iranians who wish to overthrow the Shah - they utter the same revolutionary slogans and seek the same result as the Shiites but in their own language. Groups unite in order to achieve this single goal; the result of this action proves unforeseeable but awesome. The

dangers accompanying manifestations of religious zeal are magnified when this zeal takes a revolutionary form as it does in Iran. For example, the distinction between public and private that Kant so rigorously sought becomes meaningless in such situations, and distinctions between the individuals cease to have meaning. This revolutionary zeal seeks its one goal, but cannot limit itself to this one goal. If the public/private distinction does not apply, and differences between individuals become negligible, then the question of autonomy will eventually need to be addressed. The interview in which Foucault expresses awe for the events in Iran also begins to address the question of minority and individual rights within this new post-revolutionary society, which remains an issue to this day.

Admittedly the categories that characterize Western ways of thinking cannot be applied to situations such as the Iranian revolution without distortion, but something like a need for autonomy can be seen in the various youth-led reform movements that have begun to take shape in recent years in Iran. The clerical hierarchy in Iran perhaps knows that it must adapt to this reforming tendency if it is not to find itself in the same position as its predecessor. The revolution in Iran began when the situation there became intolerable, and people united, in the name of religion, to undo what they perceived as the Westernization of their country. People began to speak and act against the government of the Shah, but they spoke and acted with a single revolutionary voice; differences between individuals were erased. The danger from a Western point of view is that the religious revolution in Iran replaced one form of heteronomy with another, and that the question of autonomy has become forgotten. The revolution in Iran was the reverse of what a revolution was supposed by modern Westerners to have been, hence the unease of Western observers to these events: it did not fit into their preconceived notions of what a revolution ought to be, for revolution at least since the French Revolution was conceived as the means whereby a population rises up to

depose a heteronomous (and largely religious) form of government and replace it with an autonomous, enlightened, and secular form of government. The revolution in Iran has not proceeded according to these expectations, hence the unease of Western observers.

Revolution is certainly the most drastic form of critique. The forces of revolution boil over when political and social situations have become so unbearable that change is necessary even if revolt should require the death of its participants. The changes instituted by what has come to be known as the Protestant Reformation are at least as decisive for Europe and the West as the Iranian Revolution has been for the Middle East, but the form this revolution has taken is very different. The essential difference between the Iranian religious revolution and the Reformation is that the Reformation entailed a turn toward individuality. It was, as Foucault points out, a critique that concerned Scripture and writing. The object of the reforms instituted by Luther concerned the individual: it was the individual who ought to have the right to interpret Scripture in her own way. The individual, rather than a religious hierarchy, becomes the authority on religious matters. Interpretation of religious texts becomes both a right and obligation for members of Protestant denominations. Whereas the general will expressed by the Iranian Revolution sought to erase differences between individuals, the Protestant reforms sought to assert a circumscribed individual autonomy. It is no longer the Church hierarchy that must care for each and all (the goal of the pastoral power instituted by the early Church) it is the individual who becomes the authority. It is a limited autonomy, for this religious autonomy answers to Scriptural rather than religious authority. Each individual becomes responsible for the interpretation of the texts, and has the obligation to communicate her interpretations to others.

The Reformation's effects were felt throughout society because this was a revolt away from certain institutions and

ecclesiastical modes of governing subjects and toward inwardness and autonomy that affected all of society. If the Church's authority could be radically questioned, and the authority of rulers within society was based at least in part on the blessing of the Church, then secular authority could be questioned as well. More fundamentally, the questioning of the Church's authority contributed to an attitude that made possible the questioning of various forms of authority. As Foucault reminds us, the Reformation came at a time when there was no real distinction in Europe between Church and secular authority.¹² For Foucault, the Reformation stands as a prominent example of critique, similar to the critical attitude Kant proposes in "What is Enlightenment" and that Foucault interprets in his own work.

Notes

1. Indeed, Kant had been a presence in Foucault's philosophy all along, as Beatrice Han ably points out in her book *Foucault's Critical Project: Between the Transcendental and the Historical*, (Stanford: Stanford UP, 2002).
2. Michel Foucault, "'Omnes et Singulatim': Toward a Critique of Political Reason," *The Essential Works of Foucault, 1954-1984, Volume Three: Power*, Ed. James D. Faubion, (NY: New Press, 1997).
3. Michel Foucault, "What is Critique?" in *What is Enlightenment? Eighteenth Century Answers and Twentieth Century Questions*, Ed. James Schmidt (Berkeley: U of California Press, 1996), 382. Hereafter cited as WC.
4. This impulse provides the French title for the first volume of the *History of Sexuality* (*La Volonté de Savoir*). Here, the naked desire to know manifests itself in the *scientia sexualis*, a coordinated set of discourses about sex that refused to utter its name. "This was in fact a science made up of evasions since, given its inability or refusal to speak of sex itself, it concerned itself primarily with aberrations, perversions, exceptional oddities, pathological abatements, and morbid aggravations." All this in order to judge the individual and gauge the health of populations, ultimately in the furtherance of life. See *History of Sexuality, Volume 1: An Introduction*. (NY: Vintage, 1978 [1976]), 53.

5. Michel Foucault, "The Masked Philosopher," *Essential Works of Foucault, Volume I: Ethics, Subjectivity, and Truth*, (New York: New Press, 1997), 323.
6. Michel Foucault, "What is Critique?" in *What is Enlightenment: Eighteenth Century Answers and Twentieth Century Questions*, Ed. James Schmidt, (Berkeley: University of California Press), 1996.
7. *Ibid*, 385.
8. See e.g. *Fearless Speech*, Ed. Joseph Pearson, (Los Angeles: Semiotext(e), 2001), 10-20: "In *parrhesia*, the speaker uses his freedom and chooses frankness instead of persuasion, truth instead of falsehood or silence, the risk of death instead of life and security, criticism instead of flattery, and moral duty instead of self-interest and moral apathy. That, then, quite generally, is the positive meaning of the word *parrhesia* in most of the Greek texts where it occurs from the Fifth Century B.C. to the Fifth Century A.D."
9. See Hannah Arendt, *On Revolution* (NY: Penguin, 1963), for a discussion of the modern conception of revolution. There are noteworthy differences between Arendt's conception of revolution as the impingement of the social onto the political realm and Foucault's conception of revolution outlined in his remarks on the Iranian Revolution. For example, the striking thing about the revolution for Foucault is that it serves as a manifestation of the general will, a concept that Arendt ties to misguided attempts by theorists to circumscribe the realm of free political action.
10. Michel Foucault, "Useless to Revolt?" *Essential Works of Foucault 1954-1984, Volume 3: Power*, Ed. James D. Faubion, (NY: New Press, 2000), 450.
11. This is Hannah Arendt's attitude as well: for Arendt, Rousseau's conception of the general will is a pernicious metaphysical abstraction that denies the avenues for individual political expression, for spontaneity within the public realm. It is thus related to the rise of the social, and the withering away of the distinction between the authentically public sphere and the private sphere of necessity.
12. Indeed, it is arguable that it is these very reforms that made possible such a distinction between religious and secular forms of authority and governmentality.