

REVIEW

Jeremy R. Carrette, *Foucault and Religion: Spiritual Corporality and Political Spirituality* (London and New York: Routledge Press, 2000). ISBN: 0415202604

In *Foucault and Religion*, Carrette presents the reader with an impressive study in which he attempts to locate and unearth a 'religious question' running throughout the margins of Foucault's writings. This work acts as a corrective to writers who, in Carrette's opinion, unsuccessfully bring Christian theology into conversation with Foucauldian themes of mysticism, spiritualism, and the "unthought." The angle, then, from which Carrette approaches Foucault's 'religious question' is one that seeks to reposition traditional religious ontology into a non-binary "space of the body and the politics of the subject."¹ Drawing attention to Foucault's own suggestion in 1963 that there "may be a religious question" throughout his work Carrette argues that if such a question exists it is one that radically alters the "traditional contours in the philosophy of religion."² This remapping of religion eclipses the notion of a religious transcendence to one that is wholly immanent. The book is divided into seven chapters. Much like the introduction, the first chapter familiarizes the reader with Foucault's writings by giving an overview of his *oeuvre*. In this chapter Carrette traces some of the important thematic developments of the 'religious question' in Foucault's archaeological thinking (1954-69), genealogical work (1970-5), and explicit discussion of Christianity in the *History of Sexuality* (1976-84). It is in chapter two, however, where Carrette begins to substantiate the book's thesis. He writes: "In order to bring some coherence to these ideas I wish to hold these fragments [religious ideas] together by framing them within Foucault's discussion of 'the said as much as the unsaid.'"³ Carrette maps the "said" and "unsaid" around the two pillars confession and silence, respectively. Instead of conceptualizing the confession and silence as binary opposites he continues to write, "paradoxically, in a non-binary system Foucault's examination of the confession was also the

1 Jeremy R. Carrette, *Foucault and Religion: Spiritual Corporality and Political Spirituality* (London and New York: Routledge Press, 2000), 6.

2 Carrette, *Foucault and Religion*, 6.

3 Carrette, *Foucault and Religion*, 25. The discussion referred to here is "The Confession of the Flesh."

archaeology of the silence.”⁴ With his framework established Carrette carries on his argument that the ‘religious question’ in Foucault’s pre- 1976 work can be viewed as recovering the body from “silences” (spiritual corporality) and his post-1976 writings can be understood in a broader context as redefining the “utterances” of religion through the technology of the self (political spirituality).

The following three chapters further expound on the fragments associated with the first manifestation of Foucault’s “religious question”, spiritual corporality. Documenting Foucault’s interaction, involvement, and influence with surrealist themes Carrette argues how Foucault’s surrealist ideas remain at the level of a philosophical disruption instead of moving into the religious realm: that is, Foucault’s disruptions always operate within the boundaries of language and are to be understood as a destabilizing of traditional religious categories. He writes: “A new ontology of language, eroticism, transgression and the Nietzschean thematic of the death of God was eventually brought together by Foucault in the 1960s to develop a ‘spiritual corporality’, a critique of religion which valorised the body.”⁵ Most importantly, surrealism as Carrette understands it created new avenues in which Foucault could recover the body and the politics of experience from the silences of religious discourse.

Continuing with the theme of how Foucault “problematizes” religion through the rescuing of the body, Carrette further expounds on the space opened up around the body with the death of God and the death of man. He does so by relating these themes to the controversial figure, the Marquis de Sade. Quick to point out the gender-specific content in Foucault’s work, Carrette gives a thorough account of Sadeian scholarship in France in the 1960s. He rightfully stresses that “Foucault is operating on a culturally constructed avant-garde Sadeian male paradigm to reinstitute the (male) body into religion,”⁶ and, in so doing, shows how one might introduce a gender inclusive framework. With the loss of the objective and subjective referents in language Carrette approvingly affirms the emergence of the “quasi-religious function [of language] in holding its own mystery and enigma.”⁷

Carrette successfully documents that the Foucauldian mystical themes are attempts to locate spirituality within discourse. In an interesting chapter showing the “epistemological gulf” separating Foucault from the early Christian mystic Pseudo-Dionysius, Carrette argues that Foucault cannot be classified under the rubric of a post-modern ‘mystic,’ a term most commonly

4 Carrette, *Foucault and Religion*, 42.

5 Carrette, *Foucault and Religion*, 61.

6 Carrette, *Foucault and Religion*, 74.

7 Carrette, *Foucault and Religion*, 78.

associated with works of Derrida. Evidenced in this chapter are Foucault's critiques of transcendental hierarchies and epistemological foundations and his repositioning of religious discourse into the 'spaces' of the body, in the destroyed boundaries between the sacred and profane, and in the promotion of "difference" instead of unity.

Shifting his focus in the last two chapters to the complementary angle of Foucault's religious question, political spirituality, Carrette locates the religious sub-text in Foucault's politics of the subject and power-knowledge matrix. Expanding the focus of scholarship on Foucault's later works beyond that of a social analysis of religious practices Carrette analyses the "philosophical-theological question of embodied thinking."⁸ In documenting this transitional period in Foucault's work, Carrette critiques Foucault for obscuring the ways in which belief and theology inform religious practice, the most notable example being Foucault's failure to acknowledge how monastic discipline is organized around theological space and time. Reading Foucault as working within a post-Nietzschean conception of the soul in *Discipline and Punish*, Carrette introduces his understanding of religion, more particularly, Christianity. He states: "Christianity could be seen to have value as a non-illusory metaphysical event."⁹ Following what he sees as a Deleuzian model of metaphysics, religion for Foucault is not only to be seen as existing in the political and social exclusions but also "'around', 'within' and 'on' the body...."¹⁰ Giving less attention to the *History of Sexuality* and Foucault's later essays, Carrette swiftly argues that Foucault's later works offer new insights into the relation of subjectivity and power. The power-knowledge matrix conditions the possibility for the transformation of the self through the ethico-political nature of Christianity.

Successfully argued throughout this book is the pressing need to disrupt the privileged traditional space of religion from the "straightjacket" of academia and the theological dualism of Christianity along with the need to enter the "heterotopias" of religion. What remains unclear throughout the book is if Carrette wishes to hold on to the notion of an ambiguous or uncertain referent (which he does) he does not translate into Foucauldian language how this referent is to be understood without invoking a Deleuzian model of metaphysics. Moreover, while acknowledging the distinction of how negative theology functions in the works of Foucault and Pseudo-Dionysus, it is puzzling at times precisely how and in what sense religion, understood outside of quotation marks, is affirmed for Foucault. While agreeing with Carrette that one needs to "find religion in the very fabric of the 'secular,'"¹¹ it

8 Carrette, *Foucault and Religion*, 111.

9 Carrette, *Foucault and Religion*, 126.

10 Carrette, *Foucault and Religion*, 126.

11 Carrette, *Foucault and Religion*, 152.

remains debatable to what extent one could read a 'religious answer' in Foucault while remaining faithful to the inter-textual approach of his writings. These comments aside, this ambitious book is informative, well-researched and offers an insightful perspective as to how religion can be theorized after Foucault.

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