Freedom and Spirituality

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Spirituality is an idiosyncratic concept in the work of Foucault, which might best be characterized as an "intensity without a 'spirit'".[1] To understand Foucault's specific concept of spirituality, we have to take into account some basic themes of his oeuvre, especially of his later work, that is, his books, interviews and lectures since 1976. In this chapter I will first analyse the way in which Foucault uses the concept of spirituality in his early work, a utilization that is inspired by surrealist writers. For this analysis I rely heavily on the work of Jeremy Carrette, who in his book *Foucault and Religion* (2000) devotes a chapter to this topic. In the second section of the chapter I briefly discuss Foucault's analysis, as found in his "middle" (1970–76) works, of dominant forms of subjectivity in the modern West. This discussion lays the ground for the chapter's third section, which analyses the "exit" status of the concept of spirituality in Foucault's final works. Here I show that spirituality constitutes an ethical self-transformation as conscious practice of freedom. In a fourth section, I discuss Foucault's epistemological claims regarding the relation between spirituality and truth. In the next two sections I analyse his concept of "political spirituality" and argue that this concept offers us a new normative perspective for cross-cultural politics. In a concluding section I illustrate Foucault's idea of spirituality as freedom practice by going into the emerging discourse of Islamic feminism.

Beyond the body/soul dualism

As Carrette shows, Foucault in his early (pre-1970) work only once talks about spirituality. In a debate on the "new novel" and surrealism, Foucault comments on certain surrealist experiments which he witnessed in which people tried to let the body speak. "(R)eference is constantly made", Foucault states,

> to a certain number of experiences – experiences, if you like, that I will call, in quotation marks, "spiritual experiences" (although "spiritual" is not quite the right word) – such as dreams, madness, folly, repetition, the double, the disruption of time, the return, etc. These experiences form a constellation that is doubtless quite coherent. I was also struck by the fact this constellation was already mapped out in surrealism.   (Foucault 1999b: 72)

Foucault shared with the surrealists an interest in "a new space of thought created by a radical critique of rationality and certainty", without, however, taking on board the wider surrealist fascination with religious ideas (Carrette 2000: 56). Through the work of semi-surrealist authors such as Artaud and Klossowski, Foucault tries to think beyond the body/soul dualism of Western, Christian and Cartesian traditions, and to conceive of what Carrette calls a "spiritual corporality", and a "reordering of spiritual concepts into the body" (*ibid.*: 54).

Whereas surrealism incorporated occult and gnostic influences in its fascination for transgression and its attempt to overcome "all control exercised by reason" (*ibid.*: 50), Foucault's interest in "spirituality" concerns modes of experience that are rooted in the body and that transgress rational or conscious thought. As we will see, Foucault will retain this element of "spiritual corporality" in his later works but will also add something else to it, since he then is no longer satisfied with the idea of resistance against the rationalist or logo-centric order as primarily a bodily expression (Thompson 2003).

Critique of normality

In his middle work, Foucault at length discusses and criticizes dominant forms of subjectivity in modern Western society. His works of the 1970s unmask the claim of Western Enlightenment that it brought progress for humanity and society through reason. "'The Enlightenment,' which discovered the liberties, also invented the disciplines" (Foucault 1979:

222). Originating in the nineteenth century, these disciplines – panoptic, controlling, discursive institutions such as prisons, schools and medical and welfare institutions – applied power techniques, such as surveillance, training and examination, to individual bodies in order to generate rational self-control. The idea that reason makes self-control possible leads to the application of disciplinary techniques not only by institutions, but also by individuals themselves, as a means of gaining such control. In this way, an internal "core self" is established and the autonomous subject is born.

The human sciences play a major role in the disciplines, classifying and categorizing people, surveilling their behaviour, and treating them where their behaviour is deemed abnormal. Sciences like psychiatry, biology, medicine and economics and, later, psychoanalysis, psychology, sociology, ethnology, pedagogy, criminology, in all their practical dimensions – such as buildings, therapy rooms, intake procedures, exams – codify what is rational and what is not, what is normal and what is not, and what is human and inhuman. Through this regime of political rationality, the subject form of the rational autonomous individual has since the Enlightenment become *the* norm in Western culture.

However, to Foucault, the political rationality that characterizes Western societies creates not only a prison for so-called abnormal people (criminals, sexual perverts, madmen, etc.) but for the "normal" ones too, and his compassion clearly lies with both (White 1996).[2] Whereas in *Discipline and Punish* Foucault analyses at length the surveilling power techniques that are applied to the body and that generate rational self-control, in the first volume of *The History of Sexuality* (1990a) he discusses an inner subjectification at an even deeper level. Discourses such as psychology, psychiatry, pedagogy and medicine force people, on behalf of an inner Truth that has to be revealed, to talk about their supposedly hidden sexual feelings, thus allocating a sexual identity to each of them. To know oneself has become an endless task of turning inward at yet deeper levels. The psy-sciences in general and Freudian psychoanalysis in particular are Foucault's *bêtes noires* in his middle work. Through them the modern Western subject has become a supposedly authentic, deep self which is compelled time and again to confess its inner feelings. The deep self to Foucault is a prison house *a fortiori*.

Spiritual practices

Foucault's historicizing of the Western subject leads him to ancient Greek and Hellenist forms of subjectivity in his final works. In his

1981–82 Collège de France course, *The Hermeneutics of the Subject* (2005a), he clearly points out that the ancient saying "you have to know yourself" (*gnothi seauton*) was grounded in something other than the search for one's inner truth. It was interwoven with the "care of the self" (*epimeleia heautou*), a tradition which we seem to have forgotten since modernity.

The label "care of the self" is, from 1976 onwards, used by Foucault to articulate ancient practices which aim for self-improvement in relation to an ethical way of life. Ethics in antiquity was a strong structure in itself, relatively autonomous in regard to other structures. It consisted of vocabularies that were intended as guides for the concrete shaping of oneself as ethical subject. The striving for self-knowledge concerned one's position and one's behaviour, so as to be able to transform oneself "in order to attain a certain state of happiness, purity, wisdom, perfection, or immortality" (Foucault 1997d: 225). Here we have a subject that is not the deep self of the disciplines but rather a more superficial self, which strives for the ethical coherence of its acting. Through constant practising or "ascesis", by way of "technologies of the self" such as writing exercises, meditation and dialogue with oneself, one tries to create an "ethos". This personal ethics (the word ethos meaning literally "character" in Greek, referring to one's personality) is not only a matter of thought; instead, it is "a mode of being for the subject, along with a certain way of acting, a way visible to others" (1997e: 286). It is in this context that Foucault again uses the concept of spirituality.

The work of Pierre Hadot, classicist and colleague of Foucault at the Collège de France, is of importance here. Hadot, in his approach to classical philosophy, emphasizes the fact that philosophy in antiquity for a large part consisted in "spiritual exercises". To indicate that ancient philosophy was a way of life that engaged the whole of existence, Hadot considers the term "spiritual" the most appropriate:

> It is … necessary to use this term, I believe, because none of the other adjectives we could use – "psychic," "moral," "ethical," "intellectual," "of thought," "of the soul" – covers all the aspects of the reality we want to describe … the word "thought" does not indicate clearly enough that imagination and sensibility play a very important role in these exercises. (1995: 81–2)

In his later work Foucault, clearly inspired by Hadot's approach, uses the concept of "spirituality" in a similar vein, namely to indicate the transforming of one's mode of being, not just of one's thinking:

> By spirituality I mean – but I'm not sure this definition can hold for very long – the subject's attainment of a certain mode of being and the transformations that the subject must carry out on itself to attain this mode of being. I believe that spirituality and philosophy were identical or nearly identical in ancient spirituality. (1997e: 294)

Whereas Foucault here equates spirituality and ancient philosophy as such, in his 1982 lectures *The Hermeneutics of the Subject* the concept of spirituality is linked to the concept of care of the self: "going through the … different forms of philosophy and the different forms of exercises and philosophical or spiritual practices, we see the principle of care of the self expressed in a variety of phrases" (2005a: 12). Carrette rightly identifies in the later Foucault an overlapping and merging of ethics and spirituality as each pertains to a "mode of self-formation" or a "mode of being" (Carrette 2000: 136, 138). Spirituality in the later Foucault parallels his definition of ethical self-transformation through ascesis which involves one's whole way of life. It is in this sense that we find a spirituality without a spirit, without an incorporeal supernatural being or immortal soul, in Foucault's work.

As with his early surrealist-inspired notion, the concept of spirituality opposes the Cartesian body/soul dualism. It explicitly involves the bodily dimension, be it this time in a normative context, that is, in the form of an ethos which is a *lived ethics* and as such involves bodily elements, acts and behaviour.

The winning of an ethos, through a care of the self, clearly is something Foucault puts forward as an exit from the impoverished self techniques of modern man, which are over-determined by surveilling and scrutinizing disciplines and governing practices. "In the Greek and Roman civilizations, such practices of the self were much more important and especially *more autonomous* than they were later, after they were taken over to a certain extent by religious, pedagogical, medical, or psychiatric institutions" (Foucault 1997e: 282, emphasis added). Care of the self in antiquity used to be the framework for the knowledge of oneself instead of the other way around, as it is in Western modernity where a care of the self only occurs through the concern for truth (*ibid.*: 295). We can conclude that the concept of spirituality in Foucault's final works points to this tradition of ethical self-transformation through ascesis, as an autonomous dimension of life. We then deal with practices of ethical self-transformation which are not dictated by moral rules or codes, but which come down to "practices of freedom", since people can freely create themselves as ethical

subjects. These ethical self-practices are "not something invented by the individual himself. They are models that he finds in his culture and are proposed, suggested, imposed upon him by his culture, his society, and his social group" (*ibid.*: 291). However, through these models, tools and techniques one can acquire and freely create a personal ethos, visible in one's acts and way of life.

When asked whether the care of the self in the classical sense should be updated, Foucault answers: "absolutely", but adds that in modern times this of course will lead to something new (*ibid.*: 294). The "growth of capabilities" of modern man should be disentangled from the dominant power regime (1997g: 317). Whereas in antiquity the care of the self was linked "to a virile society, to dissymmetry, exclusion of the other" ("all that is quite disgusting!"), "couldn't everyone's life become a work of art?" (1997e: 258, 261). Foucault's normative horizon is that freedom practices should be developed as much as possible by as many persons as possible.

Foucault emphasizes that acquiring an ethos in antiquity always took place in different philosophical schools and groups, in which people through spiritual practices trained themselves in acquiring an ethos (2005a: 113). Occasionally he talks about religious groups as well, for instance when he discusses the Therapeutae group in *The Hermeneutics of the Subject* (*ibid.*: 116). He also refers to the autonomous ethical spiritual dimension in a religious context, discussing certain strands of Christianity, for instance when he states:

> during the Renaissance you see a whole series of religious groups ... that resist this pastoral power and claim the right to make their own statuses for themselves. According to these groups, the individual should take care of his own salvation independently of the ecclesiastical institution and of the ecclesiastical pastorate. We can see, therefore, a reappearance, up to a certain point, not of the culture of the self, which had never disappeared, but a reaffirmation of its *autonomy*.   (1997f: 278, emphasis added)

Note that once again Foucault emphasizes the relatively autonomous realm of ethical spiritual self-formation. Also, more importantly, note that according to him this realm can exist in religious contexts as well (Vintges 2004). The concept of spirituality does not refer to religion as such, as Carrette (2000) implies in several places, but to practices of free ethical self-transformation, which can be found inside as well as outside religious frameworks.

Spirituality and truth

In addition to taking the form of free ethical self-transformation through self-techniques, the issue of spirituality also appears in Foucault's later work in relation to truth. In *The Hermeneutics of the Subject* he argues that "spirituality" is:

> the search, practice and experience through which the subject carries out the necessary transformations on himself in order to have access to the truth. We will call "spirituality" then the set of these researches, practices, and experiences ... [which are for the subject ...] the price to be paid for access to the truth.
> (2005a: 15)

Before Descartes, knowledge was based on this type of spirituality. The "Cartesian moment", however, marks the beginning of the modern age of the history of truth, where knowledge and knowledge alone is the condition for the subject's access to truth. Moreover, for Descartes such access is possible without the individual "having to change or alter his being as subject", that is, without the need of transforming the structure of one's subjectivity in substantial ways (*ibid.*: 17).

Foucault acknowledges that we can recognize a "false science" by its appeal to (the necessity of) such a transformation. However, he then states that in "those forms of knowledge (savoir) *that are not exactly sciences, and which we should not seek to assimilate to the structure of science*, there is again the strong and clear presence of at least certain elements, certain requirements of spirituality" (*ibid.*: 29, emphasis added). Marxism and psychoanalysis are two forms of post-Cartesian knowledge that still demand an initiation and transformation of the subject in its very being. However, both forms of knowledge have tried to conceal this, instead of openly acknowledging the necessity of ethical self-transformation, that is, spirituality as a condition of access to truth (*ibid.*). Foucault seems to imply that philosophers should not try to assimilate their form of knowledge to the structure of science, but instead should have an eye for the relation of spirituality to truth.

Perhaps to avoid any suggestion of privileging a philosophical type of knowledge which is based on initiation as closure, Foucault in his next years' lectures specifies his preferred notion of "spirituality as access to truth" by analysing the concept of *parrhēsia*. The word *parrhēsia* means "saying everything". A "*parrhēsiastēs*" is the speaker who says everything he has in mind, even if it is something which can endanger his life – for instance if it is something different from what the king,

or the majority of the people, believe. Foucault analyses at length how courageous truth-telling is part of the ancient tradition of spirituality as access to truth. In *Fearless Speech*, a collection of lectures delivered in Berkeley during the summer of 1983, Foucault defines the verbal activity of *parrhēsia* as follows: "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" (2001: 19–20).

In these lectures Foucault once more outlines the ancient Greek ideal that one's whole way of life is important: the true *parrhēsiastēs* is a person "of moral integrity", a person "of blameless principle and integrity", whose acts and thoughts are in accordance (*ibid.*: 69). In his studies on *parrhēsia* Foucault wants to trace "the roots of what we can call the critical tradition of the West". He wanted to construct a "genealogy of the critical attitude in Western philosophy" (*ibid.*: 170–71). His emphasis on the *parrhēsia* aspect of ancient spirituality might well be his implicit answer to the possible objection that, at least since Descartes, knowledge has become democratic and open instead of the prerequisite of a certain privileged group, and critical instead of based on persuasion. Foucault's work on *parrhēsia* is intended to articulate a democratic, open spiritual basis of knowledge for present purposes: a philosophical attitude of critique which is about one's whole way of life and in that sense "spiritual", an attitude which he identified as the core value of Western Enlightenment (1997g) and which he practised in his own work and life.[3]

Political spirituality

Foucault's concept of spirituality as free ethical self-transformation through ascesis is political through and through in that it is an exit, a critical alternative to the "normal" Western subject formations of the rational autonomous individual and the deep self, the products of the power/knowledge regime of Western modernity. This is the reason why Foucault invokes the concept of "political spirituality" when he speaks about "the will to discover a different way of governing oneself through a different way of dividing up true and false – this is what I would call 'political *spiritualité*'" (1991b: 82, quoted in Carrette 2000: 137). Foucault is expressing the need to detach our subjectivity from Western modernity's political rationality.

He sympathized with any resistance against this true/false regime of subjectivity, a resistance he also identified in the 1978 Iranian

Revolution, which started as a revolution against the attempt to modernize Islamic countries in a European mode. In the last lines of his article "What Are the Iranians Dreaming About?" Foucault puts forward the "possibility we have forgotten since the Renaissance and the great crisis of Christianity, a *political spirituality*" (2005b: 209). In another article on this subject, Foucault talks about Shi'ism as a form of Islam that differentiates between "mere external obedience to the code" and "the profound spiritual life". In revolutionary Iran at that time identification with the Islamic tradition combined with "the renewal of spiritual experiences", that is, the "desire to renew their entire existence" (2005c: 255). When invoking a "political spirituality", it is the dimension of freedom practices opposing truth regimes, and involving the whole of peoples' ways of life, that Foucault has in mind, and once more we find that he locates this dimension within religious contexts as well.

A cross-cultural concept of freedom

We have seen that in his final works Foucault refers to practices of free ethical spiritual self-transformation not only in secular contexts, but in religious ones as well. He refers not only to certain strands in Christianity and Islam, but also in Asian religion. Liebman Schaub discusses whether there is a counterpart to Foucault's hopelessly trapped "Western man", in the form of a hidden discourse in Foucault's work, which can be designated as an "Oriental subtext" (Liebmann Schaub 1989). Foucault concealed its presence since he wanted to avoid his work being stigmatized as "religious" or "metaphysical", and since he did not want to offer any anthropological model, that is, any absolute truth concerning the human condition.

According to Liebmann Schaub, Foucault's non-Western counter-discourse is to be found in his style rather than in overt opposition to the Western, "normalized" way of life. She, however, only analyses the early Foucault, focusing on his notions of transgression and his ideas on the disappearance of the rational autonomous subject. She argues that Foucault's unsettling style is informed by Buddhism. He wants to show the essential insufficiency of language for expressing truth, in other words that wisdom is beyond words. It is through his style, which criticizes Western civilization as a whole, that he has been a "teacher" and a "moralist".

However, if we turn to Foucault's later work, in which Eastern – and Western – philosophies are approached from their practical, ethical side,

we find that Foucault *does* offer a positive alternative to the "normalized" Western ways of life, through his new concept of spirituality as free ethical self-transformation through ascesis. Foucault, during his visit to Japan in 1978, showed great interest in the practice of Zen Buddhism. He took lessons and afterwards said to his teacher: "I'd like to ask you just one question. It's about the universality of Zen. Is it possible to separate the practice of Zen from the totality of the religion and the practice of Buddhism?" (1999b: 113). He also remarks that whereas Zen and Christian mysticism cannot be compared, the *technique* of Christian spirituality and that of Zen are comparable. Foucault's question and remark show his interest in ethical spiritual self-techniques as a cross-cultural phenomenon. He not only explored Zen in 1978 but also Islam, as we have seen from his articles in which he described the Iranian Revolution in terms of a spirituality which opposed Truth regimes and possesses the potential to inspire new political forms. What I see in these texts is not a right or wrong judgement on the Iranian Revolution,[4] but the search for a new concept of freedom which is cross-cultural in that it can take into account a diversity of moral frameworks, including religious ones.

Paraphrasing Liebman Schaub, and together with Bernauer (2004), I would conclude that an "Oriental Subtext" runs through all of Foucault's work. Bernauer asks whether an oriental influence is to be seen in Foucault's radical interrogation of Western individualism and whether his notion of self-stylization was influenced by Asia, more specifically his visits to Japan in 1970 and 1978. I suggest that this influence has been the background to his reconceptualizing of freedom in other terms than the ones of individual rational autonomy, in terms namely of spirituality as ethical self-transformation through exercises, which involve the creation and invention of one's whole way of life. His oriental interest, in my view, has inspired this normative horizon of freedom practices for all, as a cross-cultural alternative to the dominant concept of freedom of Western liberalism.

The emerging discourse of Islamic feminism

The emerging discourse of "Islamic feminism" illustrates the topicality of Foucault's new concepts. Since the 1990s, new perspectives and practices are developing that demonstrate that Islam and "gender justice" are not inherently incompatible. These perspectives and practices also criticize both Western feminism and liberalism for imposing Western concepts of freedom and autonomy on believing Muslim women, as well as Islamic fundamentalists for claiming that women in the Islamic world are already able to live their lives to the fullest.[5] Believing Muslim women in, for example, Egypt, Malaysia, Indonesia, Iran and Morocco do contest structures of male domination in the Islamic world by arguing for gender equality and gender justice in new interpretations of the moral source of Islam, the Qur'an. Scholars such as Leila Ahmed, Amina Wadud and Asma Barlas refer to the dynamic and diverse history of Islam for their reinterpretations of the Qur'an and Islamic historical traditions. They highlight the egalitarian Spirit of Islam's ethical spiritual message, and the active role of women in the history of Islam. Other studies show the active role of women in Islamic societies today, demonstrating that Islamic women are in no way the passive, oppressed creatures that many Western feminists hold them to be. In Muslim-majority countries there are women's organizations that have a feminist agenda (such as Malaysia's "Sisters in Islam").

This new emerging discourse of Islamic feminism can be analysed as a political spirituality, that is, as a practice of free ethical self-transformation which opposes the Truth regime of Western liberalism as well as the fundamentalist type of Islam. These women are freely but ethically transforming themselves through all kinds of self-techniques, on the collective and individual level, such as veiling in new contexts, educating themselves in interpreting the Qur'an, practising mixed gender prayer, and inventing themselves as modern, believing, Muslim women. The emerging discourse of Islamic feminism shows that Western feminists who contend that feminism should be based on secular liberalism's fundamentals should enlarge, if not revise, their concept of freedom, so as to escape the limits that are imposed on all women.[6]

When asked about the state of the art of Western philosophy, Foucault said:

> European thought finds itself at a turning point ... (which) is nothing other than the end of imperialism. The crisis of Western thought is identical to the end of imperialism ... There is no philosopher who marks out this period. For it is the end of the era of Western philosophy. Thus, if philosophy of the future exists, it must be born outside of Europe, or equally born in consequence of meetings and impacts between Europe and non-Europe.
>
> (1999c: 113)

Foucault, through his new concept of spirituality without a spirit, in the sense of free ethical self-transformation through self-techniques, has offered us new concepts of freedom and equality which criticize

Western modernity[7] as well as other Truth regimes, and which offer a cross-cultural normative perspective. In my view Foucault was ahead of his time in that he felt that we have to change our concepts to make sense of the culturally pluralist world we live in.

Notes

1. I borrow this phrase from Jeremy Carrette (2000: 60; see also 162–3, n.72).
2. Many argue that Foucault's work *Discipline and Punish* lacks any normative perspective. Explicit phrases, however, clearly show Foucault's rejection of the disciplines as domination, for instance where he speaks of the development of the disciplines as the "dark side" of the establishment of the egalitarian juridical framework (Foucault 1979: 222) and of the "malicious minutiae of the disciplines and their investigations" (*ibid.*: 226).
3. Discussing Kant's text "What is Enlightenment?" Foucault points out how Kant's answer "sapere aude" ("dare to know") refers not only to "institutional, ethical and political" conditions, but to a "spiritual" condition as well. Kant's answer involves as well an appeal to an "act of courage to be accomplished personally", by man, "by a change that he himself will bring about in himself". Western Enlightenment is a spiritual attitude to Foucault. He argues that it is "not faithfulness to doctrinal elements but, rather, the permanent reactivation of an attitude" that may connect us with the Enlightenment (1997g: 306, 312).
4. My view here is contrary to Afary and Anderson (2005), who fiercely attack Foucault. For a critique of their view see Honig (2008). We have to take into account that in 1978 many people considered the Iranian Revolution to be primarily an anti-colonialist revolution. The enthusiasm of this anti-imperialist uprising is what Foucault tries to describe in a few journalistic articles, wherein he discusses how people were "spiritually" involved, in that their whole way of life was at stake, and speaks in terms of a "political spirituality", opposing Truth regimes and producing something new. Foucault responded to the violence that marked the post-revolutionary power struggle in Iran by distancing himself from its outcome in the form of simply another regime of Truth. In journalistic articles published in April and May 1979 he supported the rights of the individual against the "bloody government of a fundamentalist clergy" (Foucault 2005d: 265).
5. For an overview see Dubel and Vintges (2007).
6. Okin 1999 has been very influential in the debate on feminism and multiculturalism. As the title indicates, Okin argues that multiculturalism is bad for women, and that only Western liberalism has a place for women's rights. Instead I would argue that Western liberalism in its own way puts limits on women, in that they have to adapt themselves to the ways of life, and subject form, of the Western autonomous rational individual.
7. "The political, ethical, social, philosophical problem of our days is not to try to liberate the individual from the state, and from the state's institutions, but to liberate us both from the state and from the type of individualization which is linked to the state. We have to promote new forms of subjectivity through the refusal of this kind of individuality which has been imposed on us for several centuries" (Foucault 1982a: 216).