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# Life after the Death of God? Michel Foucault and Postmodern Atheism

by John Coffey

## Summary

The French intellectual Michel Foucault (1926-84) was one of the most influential thinkers of the twentieth century. His books on madness, medicine, knowledge, punishment, and sexuality have had a major impact across a wide range of disciplines, and become set texts on undergraduate courses throughout Britain and America. His life, moreover, reflected some of the most significant cultural trends of the past thirty years: the rise of the gay subculture, the new openness to the non-rational, the growing experimentation with sex and drugs, the fascination with the body and the self. This paper suggests that Foucault was driven by an intense desire to find a substitute for communion with God.

## Introduction

In 1948 Michel Foucault attempted to commit suicide. He was at the time a student at the élite Parisian university, the *École Normale*. The resident doctor there had little doubt about the source of the young man's distress. Foucault appeared to be racked with guilt over his frequent nocturnal visits to the illegal gay bars of the French capital. His father, a strict disciplinarian who had previously sent his son to the most regimented Catholic school he could find, arranged for him to be admitted to a psychiatric hospital for evaluation. Yet Foucault remained obsessed with death, joked about hanging himself and made further attempts to end his own life.

This youthful experience of himself as homosexual, suicidal, and mentally disturbed proved decisive for Foucault's intellectual development. The subject matter of many of his later books arose from his own experience – *Madness and Civilisation* (1961), *The Birth of the Clinic* (1963), *Discipline and Punish* (1975), and *The History of Sexuality* (3 vols, 1976-84) all dwelt on topics of deep personal concern to their author. Foucault's intellectual career was to be a lifelong crusade on behalf of those whom society labelled, marginalised, incarcerated and suppressed.<sup>1</sup>

## Foucault's critique of modernity

As a crusader for liberation Foucault stood at the end of a long line of politically-engaged French intellectuals – from Voltaire to Émile Zola to Jean-Paul Sartre. Yet Foucault's strategy for resisting oppression was in stark contrast to that employed by previous generations. Thinkers steeped in the assumptions of Christianity and the eighteenth century Enlightenment had typically appealed to universal categories in order to overthrow tyranny. The French Revolution's 'Declaration of the Rights of Man and Citizen' (1789), for example, had insisted that the aim of every political association was to defend 'the natural, inalienable, and sacred rights of man'.

Postmodern thinkers like Foucault have major problems with this Enlightenment approach. They question the very existence of rights which are natural, inalienable and sacred. If one does not believe in a Creator God, they point out, it is hard to see how all people can be endowed with such natural rights. The nineteenth century German philosopher, Friedrich Nietzsche – the grandfather of postmodernism – insisted that God was dead and that with him had died all notions of a universal human nature, or of absolute moral laws. These universals and absolutes were now exposed as mere human inventions. 'There are no moral facts whatever', he declared. 'Moral judgement has this in common with religious judgement – that it believes in realities which do not exist'.<sup>2</sup>

1 The best 'way in' to Foucault's thought is through *The Foucault Reader*, Penguin, London, 1991. Quotations are taken from there and from J. Miller, *The Passion of Michel Foucault*, HarperCollins, London, 1993.

2 Nietzsche is quoted from Miller and from *A Nietzsche Reader*, Penguin, London, 1977.

In 1953 Foucault read Nietzsche for the first time, with 'a great passion'. He found Nietzsche's doctrines profoundly liberating, 'a revelation'. It occurred to Foucault that the moral and social 'truths' invoked in order to label him 'deviant' were mere fictions. There was no need to feel guilt over madness, homosexuality or suicidal tendencies. For the rest of his life, he would devote himself to showing how grand slogans and scientific terms were simply tools for legitimising relationships of power and domination.

In *Madness and Civilisation*, for example, Foucault examined how during the Age of Reason the mad were confined in institutions, whereas previously they had roamed free and been viewed with a certain respect. This 'great confinement', he pointed out, was justified in the name of Reason and Humanity. Those who did not conform to the conventional notion of what was rational were labelled as 'mad', a supposedly value-neutral term, and then marginalised through incarceration. The noble 'truths' trumpeted by the Enlightenment were employed to legitimise the exercise of domination, not to prepare the way to a more humane, rational, benign and liberal society. In *Discipline and Punish* Foucault argued that the decline of torture and public execution and the rise of the prison was far from being a great moral advance. The modern prison, he suggested, does not simply work on people's bodies; it attempts to control their minds. Prisoners are categorised by experts, placed under surveillance, scrutinised and manipulated. Furthermore, he argued, the prison is a microcosm of modern society; we are all under surveillance, labelled and pigeon-holed by bureaucracies, and locked away if we are found to be deviant or abnormal.

## The response to Foucault

Foucault's protests meshed perfectly with the assumptions of a generation shaped by the counter-culture of the late 1960s and early 1970s. Conscious of Vietnam and Watergate, students were highly receptive to conspiracy theories featuring the oppressive power of the Establishment, and Foucault's ideas provided intellectual tools for radical new liberation movements. Most obviously, they were attractive to the burgeoning gay subculture. The universal norm of 'Nature' had been used in both Christian and Enlightenment discourse to brand the homosexual unnatural and perverse. Foucault claimed to unmask the universal norm as nothing more than a tool of oppression being wielded by the powerful. And in doing so he became one of the leading influences upon gay intellectuals and 'Queer Studies'.

Within mainstream intellectual culture too, Foucault's work inspired extensive commentary. A decade after his death almost one hundred books have been published on his thought. Yet his provocative critique of modernity has not gone unchallenged. His critics argue that he oversimplifies complex developments, bases sweeping generalisations on slender evidence, and underestimates the great achievements of liberal democracies. They also complain that Foucault's work is riddled by internal contradictions. He attacks global norms such as Freedom and Justice, yet his protest against oppression implicitly assumes the very norms that he repudiates. He sets himself the task of unmasking truth-claims, yet he himself appears to be making truth-claims throughout his work. And although much of his thought presents the individual self as a passive victim of structural forces too powerful to resist, he also implies that liberation and self-creation are real possibilities.<sup>3</sup>

This final contradiction in Foucault's thinking seems all the more striking given what we now know about his own life. For as James Miller's recent book, *The Passion of Michel Foucault* (1993) demonstrates, Foucault clearly thought of himself as an active agent, engaged in a personal project of turning his life into a unique work of art.

## Foucault and self-creation

*The Passion of Michel Foucault* caused a storm of protest when it first appeared, for it focused on the most sensational aspects of Foucault's life. To some of Foucault's followers, Miller is a writer with an anti-Foucauldian agenda. Whereas Foucault spoke of the disappearance of the self, Miller places 'a persistent and purposeful self' at the centre of his biography. Whereas Foucault aimed to unmask truth-claims as fronts for power relations, Miller frankly asserts that he has 'tried to tell the whole truth, as best I could'. And whereas Foucault protested against the ways in which modern society categorised and scrutinised people, Miller places Foucault's life under surveillance and tries to make 'sense' of it.

Miller, however, is not so easy to dismiss. He clearly admires Foucault, and his argument is based on a wealth of documentation. His stress on the self and truth-telling, moreover, fits with Foucault's later emphasis on the obligation to tell 'the truth about oneself'. The renowned critic Edward Said spoke for many when he called Miller's book 'an essential companion to a reading of late twentieth-century Western culture'.<sup>4</sup>

What this 'essential companion' reveals is the centrality of the idea of self-creation in contemporary thought. If Nietzsche's iconoclastic attack on universal norms has given birth to postmodernist scepticism, its corollary – that one has to create one's own norms – is becoming almost equally influential. Since individuals have no obligation to conform to a pattern set in heaven, they are free to fashion themselves in whatever way they choose. One's nature and one's values are not given, they are invented. 'Let us', Nietzsche urged his readers, 'be involved in the creation of our own new tables of values... we want to be those who give themselves their own law, those who create themselves!' 'One thing is needed', he declared, 'to give style to one's character – a great and rare art.' And the way to do this, he insisted, was by unlocking the 'Dionysian' element in one's personality – the wild, untamed, animal energy within, one's own personal *daimon*. 'Man needs what is most evil in him for what is best in him'. Only by exercising 'the will to power' could one discover transcendence.

In a 1983 interview, Foucault made it clear that he endorsed Nietzsche's views on self-creation. Sartre and California's New Agers had gone awry, he suggested, because they had introduced the notion of 'authenticity', implying that one had to be faithful to one's true self. In fact there was nothing within or without to which one had to be true – self-creation had no such limits. It was about aesthetics, not morals; one's only concern should be to fashion a self that was 'a work of art'.

Like Nietzsche, Foucault believed that the tools for such self-fashioning were to be found in what he called 'limit experience' – experience of extremes which could release powerful creative forces and produce intense joy. His fascination with madness, death, violence, perversion, suicide was nourished by a conviction that these were not things to be ignored, cured, or locked away, but creative phenomena to be released. His books were not simply negative critiques of oppression; they included an implicit challenge to liberate oneself by transgressing boundaries. *Madness and Civilisation*, for example, implied that the irrational side of the human personality should be explored rather than contained.

## Foucault's personal quest

Foucault himself was committed to doing just this, and Miller calls his entire life 'a great Nietzschean quest'. As a student, his heroes were artists and philosophers fixated on the dark side of life. He decorated his room with Goya's etchings of the grotesque violence of war, and revered the avant-garde actor Antonin Artaud, whose

3 For critiques of Foucault see D. C. Hoy, ed., *Foucault: A Critical Reader*, Polity Press, Cambridge, 1986; and P. Burke, ed., *Michel Foucault: Critical Perspectives*, Scolar Press, Aldershot, 1992.

4 For various views on Miller's work see 'A symposium on James Miller's *The Passion of Michel Foucault*', *Salmagundi*, vol. 97, 1993, pp 29-99. For a critique of Miller see D. Halperin, *Saint Foucault: Towards a Gay Hagiography*, OUP, New York, 1996.

'theatre of cruelty' was marked by obscenity, glossolalia, rage, and incoherent incantations. Foucault also immersed himself in the pornographic writings of the Marquis de Sade, who claimed that through sexual torture one could experience transfiguration.

In his own life, Foucault sought out limit experience. From the late 1960s to the mid-1970s he found them in the disorder produced by the riots of French students and the ultra-left. He maintained that 'the craving, the taste, the capacity, the possibility of an absolute sacrifice' on the part of a crowd led to 'shared rapture'. By the mid-1970s, however, he was becoming disillusioned by political violence, and disturbed by 'the fascism in all of us'. He began to experiment with a very different kind of limit experience. In 1975, on a visit to Death Valley, he took LSD for the first time, just as the sun was setting. The result was a kind of epiphany about which he enthused for years to come. Tears of joy poured down his face. 'The sky has exploded and the stars are raining down on me', he told a companion. 'I am very happy'.

California in the mid-1970s was also the scene of Foucault's full-scale immersion in consensual sadomasochistic sex (S/M). He was teaching at the University of Berkeley and had easy access to the gay bars and bathhouses of San Francisco. For Foucault, this was the perfect opportunity to put into practice the theories of de Sade. In interviews with gay journalists, Foucault extolled the virtues of S/M. It was, he maintained, 'a kind of creation, a creative enterprise' in which participants invented new selves by exploring 'new possibilities of pleasure'.

If Foucault regarded the pain of S/M as somehow liberating, it is little wonder that he saw death in similar terms. When James Miller interviewed Foucault's lover, Daniel Defert, he was told that the philosopher 'took AIDS very seriously'. Yet Defert also claimed that 'when Foucault went to San Francisco for the last time, he took it as a limit-experience'. Miller concludes from this that 'given the circumstances in San Francisco in the fall of 1983, as best as I could reconstruct them, to have taken AIDS as a limit experience... would have involved engaging in potentially suicidal acts of passion with consenting partners, most of them likely to be infected already. Deliberately throwing caution to the wind, Foucault and these men were wagering their lives together'.

In the light of Foucault's statements about death and suicide, this reconstruction seems highly plausible. 'To die for the love of boys. What could be more beautiful?', Foucault had once asked. 'One should work on one's suicide throughout one's life', he stated on another occasion. By throwing himself with reckless abandon into the bathhouse scene when the spectre of AIDS was becoming clear, therefore, Foucault may have been trying to achieve a fitting climax to his life, one which fused his great obsessions: madness, perversion, torture and death. 'The path to one's own heaven', as Nietzsche had remarked, 'always leads through the voluptuousness of one's own hell'. In June 1984, eight months after his final visit to San Francisco, Foucault died of AIDS.

## Learning from Foucault

It would be easy at this point to dismiss Foucault with nothing more than a condemnation of his lifestyle. Christians will recall that Paul in Romans 1 identifies sexual depravity as a sign of human rebellion against God. But we are likely to forget that Paul goes on to assert that we are *all* depraved, every single one of us.<sup>5</sup> We may also forget that Jesus, who denounced sin in the most emphatic terms, befriended 'sinners' and exposed the hypocrisy of those who claimed to be righteous.<sup>6</sup> If we want to be faithful to Scripture, therefore, we must combine the call to repentance with a deep sense that we are sinners saved by grace. Moreover, if we want to understand

contemporary culture we should be willing to think hard about Foucault's life and thought.

His *thought*, after all, may have some important things to teach us. His analysis of modern society is often profound and his critique of the Enlightenment's rationalistic *hubris* is one that Christians should welcome.<sup>7</sup> Moreover, his suspicion that truth-claims act as covers for oppression should alert us to the abuse of power by the church. High-sounding religious claims *can* be used to legitimate self-interest and domination – the theological case made for apartheid in South Africa provides a tragic example. Sensitised by Foucault's critique, we should be driven back to the scriptural teaching that the Church is not meant to conquer by worldly power or wisdom, but by proclaiming the 'foolish' message of a crucified God.<sup>8</sup> This message is certainly the truth, but it is truth that draws people in love and sets them free from a gnawing sense of guilt by enabling them to grow in Christ.<sup>9</sup>

Foucault's *life* may also have a great deal to tell us about contemporary culture. For whilst it is tempting to dismiss him as an extremist, his popularity suggests otherwise. Foucault has been terribly chic among students and intellectuals over the past two decades precisely because he articulated and personified their sensibilities. Like many others in the counter-culture he was convinced that a new self could be created through experimentation with drugs and sex, flirtation with the non-rational, exploration of the body and its potentialities. At a time when drug-use, all-night raves, body-piercing, and flexible sexuality are more widespread than ever before, Foucault's life takes on considerable relevance. It suggests that there may be something more to this counter-culture than the mere search for a good time.

## Idolatry and the longing for God

Foucault's fascination with limit experience, after all, has an unmistakably theological dimension to it. Even the language of Foucault and his heroes borrows repeatedly from Christianity. One of his mentors, Georges Bataille, maintained that voluptuously painful eroticism made possible 'a negative theology founded on mystical experience'. When Foucault described the sexual experimentation of gay men he did so in frankly sacramental terms; he talked of 'a transubstantiation' of agony into ecstasy, 'an unholy communion' of bodies. He retained a lifelong interest in the demonic, and even talked of writing a book on the subject. He was also attracted to Christians like Saint Anthony, Pascal and Dostoyevsky, who stressed that the route to God lay through suffering and foolishness. He himself was, according to Miller, 'a kind of mystic'.

From a Christian point of view Foucault's atheistic mysticism is unsurprising, for we are fashioned in the divine image, created 'to glorify God and to enjoy him forever' (Westminster Shorter Catechism). And it is because the human self can only find its true identity in relationship with a Triune God that those estranged from their Creator will continually experience a painful sense of unsatisfied longing.<sup>10</sup> As Augustine put it, God has made us for himself and our hearts are restless till they find their rest in him. Foucault's restlessness, his frenzied quest for transcendence, can be seen as a search for God in the wrong places.

The tragedy of Foucault's life was that he took for granted Nietzsche's brash announcement of the death of God. After reacting against a Catholic upbringing he never thought of Christianity as a serious option. Nietzsche had once written, 'Have I been under-

5 Rom. 3:9-20.

6 Matt. 5:27-30; 9:9-13; Luke 18:9-14; John 8:2-11.

7 A brilliant example of Christian interaction with Foucault's work is David Lyon's book, *The Electronic Eye: The Rise of the Surveillance Society*, Polity Press, Cambridge, 1994.

8 2 Cor. 10:1-4; 1 Cor. 1:18-31.

9 John 8:32. For further Christian reflections on this see A. Thiselton, *Interpreting God and the Postmodern Self: On Meaning, Manipulation and Promise*, T&T Clark, Edinburgh, 1995.

10 See M. Ovey, 'The human identity crisis: can we do without the Trinity?', *Cambridge Papers*, vol. 4, no. 2, June 1995.

stood? Dionysius against the Crucified'. Foucault, unfortunately, understood all too well; when he experienced longing for God, he looked to the Dionysian impulses within, not to Jesus on the Cross. Yet as the philosopher Roger Scruton has argued, Foucault was 'a sort of passionate heretic' among modern atheists, 'trying as it were, to use the numinosity of the irrational to plug the supposed gap left by the absent God'. Like the thousands of young people who seek a sacramental experience by sharing the drug Ecstasy at raves, Foucault was trying to find a substitute for true worship.

Augustine understood this phenomenon. In his *Confessions*, he looked back on life before his conversion and realised that all along he had been searching unconsciously for God, even when he had entered a 'dark hell of illicit desire' in Carthage. 'I was looking for you', Augustine confessed, 'by the sensations of the flesh'. Yet although he felt 'a hunger within' for God, he mistook the 'glittering phantasies' of the world for the Creator and turned to philosophy to justify his own estrangement from the Lord.

The Christian suspects that Foucault was doing something similar. For although he sought to demolish Enlightenment idols, he seems in the end to have slid into a form of self-deification, in which care and devotion were lavished on the self rather than on the Creator. His mentor, Nietzsche, was frank about his own idolatry. 'Let me reveal my heart to you entirely, my friends: if there were gods, how could I endure not to be a god? Hence there are no gods.' For Nietzsche God was a rival, an impediment to his own autonomy. God must be killed if the individual self was to reign.<sup>11</sup> For Foucault the situation was more poignant. His life was devoted not to killing God, but to filling the terrible vacuum left by God's apparent death. His idolatry, like that of the people of Athens in Acts 17, probably arose as much from ignorance and a deep sense of emptiness as from the desire to be autonomous.

Yet like the young Augustine, Foucault was engaged in intellectual self-justification. By portraying the self as a prisoner of society, his

writings made it possible to legitimise promiscuity, political violence and sadomasochism as strategies of liberation. For Christians, this is a reminder that our fallenness affects our minds as much as our wills and passions.<sup>12</sup> If appeals to Truth, Justice and Human Nature can mask power bids, then sophisticated intellectual argument can mask rebellion against God. Insofar as Foucault's thought was an attempt to do this, it presents us with a tragic case of self-deception.

Foucault, of course, would have regarded this interpretation of his life as the tool of those determined to condemn and manipulate him, rather than as the truth spoken in love to set him free. But did he begin to feel in his dying days that he had taken the wrong path 'to his own heaven'? James Miller thinks not. He paints an upbeat portrait of Foucault facing death bravely, his life's work successfully completed. Yet the reality may have been much grimmer. Foucault's friend, Hervé Guibert, later wrote a book about how Foucault and a group of gay friends in Paris coped with the coming of AIDS. According to one reviewer, 'Guibert gives a much more painful account of Foucault's mental deterioration and confusion than does Miller, and paints a perfectly horrible picture of the bodily torment of the last few weeks. Worse perhaps, Guibert quotes Foucault saying of his impending death: "You always think that in a certain kind of situation you'll find something to say about it, and now it turns out there's nothing to say after all"'.<sup>13</sup>

12 See Rom. 1:21; Col. 1:21.

13 A. Ryan, 'Foucault's life and hard times', *The New York Review of Books*, 8 April 1993, p17. The English translation of Guibert's novel is entitled *To the Friend who did not Save My Life*, Quartet, London, 1991.

11 See B. Ingraffia, *Postmodern Theory and Biblical Theology*, CUP, Cambridge, 1995, pp 96-7.

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