

REVIEW

Jonathan Tran, *Foucault and Theology* (London & New York: T & T Clark, 2011), ISBN: 978-0567033437

In *Foucault and Theology*, Jonathan Tran sets out to appropriate Michel Foucault's "profound, if complicated account of hope," and his "faithfulness" to his ethical-critical task, towards Christian ends—specifically, towards re-articulating Christian hope and faithfulness today before the apparent ubiquitousness of capitalist power. In the process, he wishes "to give a fresh account of Foucault's work and a fresh analysis of Christianity." (1) To this end, he departs from the tendency of many previous such readings which focus on the ways in which Foucault's work can be considered theological. Instead, he seeks to envision the world "as if Foucauldian," while holding to a Christian sensibility, which eschews *resistance* to a quasi-invincible power-without-outside in favour of *witness* to God's already-achieved (eschatological) victory over it. (Witness is thus, of course, a kind of resistance, but one which operates by exposing power as already defeated, rather than contesting it directly). (3-6) While acknowledging the many differences separating Foucault and Christian theology, Tran focuses upon establishing how Foucault discovers in early Christian practices of the self a form of self-care which can support an effective form of contemporary Christian witness. As Tran himself asserts, this is not the standard Christian move of *ressourcement* (returning to early Christian sources as an originary resource for revitalising Christian thought and practice). Rather, the freshness of his theological approach is to follow Foucault's move of returning (as a subject of modern biopower) to ancient thought and practice as a means of gaining critical distance from the modern—the better to grasp and contest it from within its hegemonic discourses and practices. That is, he aims at a Christian thinking with Foucault, which respects the differences between Foucauldian and Christian thought.

Tran's argument (in the two opening chapters) is that Foucault's notion of power, and especially of biopower, offers a valuable means of theorizing capitalist power, as neither allows for any outside of the productive relations that they generate. At the same time, his notion of an emergent subjectivity that is constituted by biopower as its condition of possibility, points to a genuine resistance 'inside' of power. Tran elaborates upon these points by examining Hardt and Negri's utilisation of Foucault's ideas in their theorisation of capitalist empire, specifically their notion that although the ubiquity of empire generates despair, the multitude of subjectivities, upon which it depends, is also the source of a complex hope. Empire, paradoxically, depends for its vitality upon the desires and subjectivities of the multitude. For Tran, Hardt and Negri reveal a Foucaul-

dian horizontal transcendence governed not by teleology, but by the historical dynamism of multiple biopolitical subjectivities.

To link these ideas to Christian self-care and Christian witness, Tran turns indirectly, in Chapter 3, to Foucault's own practice of the self by considering the adequacy of the conception of the relation of his life and work, in his biographies to date. He follows David Halperin in critiquing Didier Eribon's biography for failing to link Foucault's thought to his life sufficiently and, especially, James Miller's biography for reductively treating Foucault's thought as a function of one aspect of his life (his sex).¹ Tran criticises Halperin, however, for attempting to assert the truth of Foucault's life and thought against these approaches, rather than allowing them—in what he claims is a more Foucauldian fashion—to speak for themselves beyond paradigms of truth-telling. Tran finds a parallel here with Christian practice, which is often unconcerned with establishing the truth of its stance than with witnessing to that which is believed in. (89) From this analysis of Foucault's 'witness,' Tran turns explicitly to his analysis of care of the self and especially its Christian forms.

The fourth chapter offers an outline of Foucault's notion of care of the self against the backdrop of Heideggerian *Sorge*. In particular, Tran argues that Foucault contrasts Christian self-sacrifice as a form of ethical self-care, with the modern attempt to found the self on positive knowledge of the self, affirmed only in negation by Christianity, and that he was fascinated with the alternative subjective possibilities Christian self-sacrifice opened up. Tran's analysis becomes particularly interesting when he brings the notion of the ubiquity of power to bear on asceticism and martyrdom, conceived of as practices of self-care—extending Foucault's analysis in novel ways. (112ff.) As power is ubiquitous, the acts of ascetic and the martyr are, he argues, acts of power against power—a making visible of the limits of power. The martyr's act is not one of mere resignation before the power of the tyrant, but an exercise of power that demonstrates the limits of the latter's power to compel submission. While such actions are underwritten by Christological claims (participation in the sufferings of Christ, is also a participation in his victory), Tran argues that they are also perfectly thinkable within Foucault's framework of power. Interesting here is the further notion that because Christianity sees its victory as eschatological, it sees "no *other* place for the expression of Christian faith" (123)—that is to say, because victory is not to be achieved in worldly politics or liberation, it does not seek to remove itself from the everyday world dominated by power, or to build an alternative life outside of it. Rather, its witness can be fully incarnated in this world—without, he suggests, the Platonic anxiety about the adequacy of the sensible world, or without resorting to hegemonic power—the evidence of the history of Christianity notwithstanding. Moreover, in this regard, the Christian subject is not at a remove from the world, not a "pure indeterminacy," but a subject thoroughly constituted within and against worldly relations of power. (123) What emerges from this analysis is a novel outline of a contemporary, distinctively Christian practice of care of the self, which suggests something of the specific resources of the Christian nexus of eschatology and

¹ David M. Halperin, *Saint Foucault: Towards A Gay Hagiography* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 1995), 126ff.

incarnation to counter capitalist power, beyond Foucault's narrower concern with the genealogical contribution of Christianity to modern subjectivity.

The final chapter is a case-study of the power of a Christian ethics of self-care, applied to the question of eating animals, which I will not consider in detail, but which is an interesting argument in its own right, and offers further interesting comments on how the Christian Eucharist might inform subjective practice. (153-59) In what follows, I will instead seek to offer a degree of assessment of the main thrust of Tran's argument.

First of all, *Foucault and Theology* is undoubtedly a valuable contribution to the growing body of work on the relation of Foucault and Christianity. Tran has succeeded in offering a fresh reading of Foucauldian power, noteworthy both for the fluency of its articulation and its thoroughgoing integration of Foucault's elaboration of biopower and governmentality in his *Collège de France* lecture courses of the late 1970s. He has also shown clearly how care of the self is a direct ethical-political response to challenges raised by Foucault's analyses of biopower (where all too often his work on the self is still taken as a withdrawal from questions of power.)² As indicated above, Tran also has gone some way to elaborating, upon Foucault's narrower genealogical concerns, the distinctive dynamics of a Christian care of the self, framed by eschatological victory, incarnation, and witness, and linked to practices of asceticism and martyrdom. There would appear to be considerable scope for building on the initial important steps that Tran has taken in this direction. (Tran's primary focus on Foucault's work means that his elaborations of elements of a contemporary Christian self-care are generally compact.)

Nevertheless, the argument of this book is not without significant tensions. The key issue, perhaps, is that although Tran aims to avoid looking for ways in which Foucault's thought may be considered to be theological, his philosophical portrait of Foucault is one which ultimately dovetails closely with his own theological vision, requiring interpretations of aspects of his thought that are difficult to sustain. Not least, Tran tends to overstate the undoubtedly real importance of Christian practices of the self to Foucault and to simplify his, at best, ambivalent attitude to them. For instance, he offers the questionable contention that Foucault "only went through the Greeks and the Romans to get to the Christians," (95) with other comments leaving the reader with the impression that Foucault's main analysis of practices of the self lay with the Christians rather than the Greeks and Romans, with the former more important. Certainly, Tran rightly stresses Foucault's fascination with Christian self-sacrifice in its opposition to the modern subject of self-knowledge, but without attending to Foucault's unease with dimensions of Christian forms of confession of the flesh, and especially their continuities with modern forms of confession of the self.³ Neither does Tran pay significant attention to Foucault's discovery of a distinctive Greek conception of self-care, irreducible to later Christian conceptions, nor to his embrace of this aesthetics of the self over

² Slavoj Žižek is perhaps the most prominent proponent of this view. See, for example, Slavoj Žižek, *The Ticklish Subject: The Absent Centre of Political Ontology* (New York and London: Verso, 1999), 252.

³ See, for example, Michel Foucault, "About the Beginnings of the Hermeneutics of the Self," in Jeremy Carrette, ed., *Michel Foucault: Religion and Culture* (New York and London: Routledge, 1999), 180-181.

Christian self-sacrifice in constructing his ethics.⁴ (Some of Tran's readings appear to better reflect Foucault's position circa 1980-81.)

Moreover, Tran's reading of Foucauldian power via Hardt and Negri tends to erode Foucault's distinctive conception of the historical space of politics in a way that minimises tensions between Foucault's practice and Christian witness to a trans-historical victory over power. The problem is that Hardt and Negri tend to read hegemonic (*bio*)*pouvoir* and subjective *puissance* as bound together in a single, quasi-totalised movement of empire, whereas Foucault's later elaboration of biopower and subjectivation tends to historicise and delimit capitalist power. Contra Tran's reading, the later Foucault holds that if power is everywhere, hegemonic power is not necessarily so (infinite reach does not imply absolute control, and power as such cannot straightforwardly be a model for capitalist power) and subjective *puissances* are not necessarily bound up with the movement of *pouvoir*. By reading Foucault through Hardt and Negri, the tension between Foucault's concern with historical possibility and Tran's emphasis upon transhistorical victory is obscured. (Not least, the Foucauldian question arises as to whether witness to transhistorical victory can be adequate to a given context, if historical possibilities of contesting power exist. It is not that the question need necessarily be answered in favour of Foucault, but it is important that the question be allowed its full weight and significance. Equally, Foucault would undoubtedly seek to complicate significantly Tran's interesting notion that transhistorical victory over power supports an 'incarnational' subjectivity.)

A similar tension arises in relation to Tran's conception of the witness of Foucault's life and thought. For this account leaves out of the equation the later Foucault's growing concern to articulate the relation of his life and intellectual practice to *truth*, and to establish the status of both as forms of truth-telling. Again, Tran's reading tends to underestimate the significance, for Foucault, of the difference between a historical and transcendent conception of truth. None of this is to devalue Tran's effort to think Christian witness within a world of Foucauldian power. The point rather is that, in spite of his intentions he has tended to construct a theologically-compatible Foucault, rather than giving full weight to the complex distances that separates Foucault and Christianity and full force to the mutual contestation of Christian and Foucauldian worldviews. While Tran is correct that Foucault and Christians might find themselves sharing concerns about capitalist power, the deeper point is that the issues which separate them are frequently crucial in contemporary continental debates about the possibility of politics, suffused as they are with questions of messianicity, grace, etc., and their materialist or theological connotations.⁵

⁴ If the trajectory of Foucault's later work is complex, it nonetheless is characterised by a broad shift from the view that the Christian practices incorporate all that is significant in ancient practices of the self (a view held in the period 1980-81 approximately) to the view that earlier Greek practices of the self supported an aesthetics of the self significantly different from the Christian confession of the flesh (a view held from 1982 onwards) See Frédéric Gros, "Course Context" in Michel Foucault, *The Hermeneutics of the Subject: Lectures at the Collège de France, 1981-82* (Hampshire: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005), 508ff.

⁵ Such questions permeate the efforts of thinkers such as Slavoj Žižek, Alain Badiou, and Giorgio Agamben to re-vitalise the notion of the political.

In spite of these reservations, *Foucault and Theology* is valuable as a serious attempt to come to terms with the implications for theological thinking of Foucault's later concerns with biopower and care of the self. And the book not only points to a new theological approach to Foucault, but points to significant possibilities of contemporary *Christian* practices of the self, which take as their point of departure Foucault's analysis of worldly power.

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