

# Introduction to Michel Foucault's "Political Spirituality as the Will for Alterity"

Sabina Vaccarino Bremner

In 1978, Michel Foucault planned a series of philosophical journalistic dispatches, a *reportage d'idées*, for the Italian newspaper *Corriere della Sera*. This series, which was only ever partially realized, featured prominent intellectuals reporting around the world on events in which ideas were in the midst of "being born, getting stirred up, disappearing, or reappearing."<sup>1</sup> The most famous, and controversial, contribution to this project was Foucault's own: a series of dispatches from Iran in September and November 1978, reporting on the ongoing protests against the shah that precipitated the Iranian Revolution of 1978 and 1979. To date, Foucault's position on Iran is routinely invoked by his detractors as evidence of his opposition to Enlightenment values. None of Foucault's remarks on Iran has come in for more criticism, however, than his term of *political spirituality* to describe the stance of the Iranian protesters of 1978.<sup>2</sup> Although he uses the term only once in his prior published writings on Iran,<sup>3</sup> the notion of political

Unless otherwise noted, all translations are my own.

1. Michel Foucault, "Les 'Reportages' d'idées," *Dits et écrits*, ed. François Ewald, Daniel Defert, and Jacques Lagrange, 2 vols. (Paris, 2001), 2:707.

2. For a book-length critique of Foucault's writings on Iran, see Janet Afary and Kevin B. Anderson, *Foucault and the Iranian Revolution: Gender and the Seductions of Islamism* (Chicago, 2005). For a recent and important defense of Foucault's position, see Behrooz Ghamari-Tabrizi, *Foucault in Iran: Islamic Revolution after the Enlightenment* (Minneapolis, 2016). Both books build much of their argument around their respective analyses of the notion of political spirituality, although in opposite directions.

3. See Foucault, "À quoi rêvent les Iraniens?" *Dits et écrits*, 2:694.

spirituality has irrevocably shaped both the initial and ensuing reaction to Foucault's *reportage*.<sup>4</sup>

In the following interview, never before published in full, Foucault advances the most complete extant explanation of how he understands political spirituality.<sup>5</sup> "Spirituality," as Foucault defines it here, is not a synonym for religion, but "a certain practice by which the individual is displaced, transformed, disrupted, to the point of renouncing their own individuality, their own subject position. It's no longer being the subject that one had been up to that point."<sup>6</sup> Because spirituality so conceived can be found both within and outside of religion, Foucault argues that this notion applies to virtually *all* political and social movements, including the October Revolution and the American Revolution. Indeed, Foucault claims here, "revolutions *without* spirituality are the exception" ("P," p. 000; my emphasis). Thus, Foucault does not restrict the notion of political spirituality to the Iranian Revolution or to Islam, as his detractors have construed it, but takes it to be a more general concept, characterizing the nature of political and historical upheavals as such.

Far from presenting Foucault's stance on Iran as a point of rupture between the 1970s emphasis on power and the 1980s emphasis on ethics, Foucault's remarks on this point clarify the *continuity* of these reflections with the later developments in his thought. Indeed, the definition of *spirituality* he gives below importantly anticipates the concept he advances in a 1984 interview: "Spirituality . . . refers to the subject's access to a certain way of

4. Indeed, one of Foucault's first reactions to the censure of his view was a 1978 response to a letter sent in to *Le Nouvel Observateur* by a French-Iranian reader, who took issue precisely with Foucault's advocacy of a "Muslim spirituality" against the Western values of the shah (Foucault, "Réponse de Michel Foucault à une lectrice iranienne," *Dits et écrits*, 2:708). See also Foucault's March 1979 response to Claudie and Jacques Broyelle, who ordered Foucault "to explain himself" after the unsuccessful women's protests against the imposition of the *chador* and the first executions of political dissenters (Foucault, "Michel Foucault et l'Iran," *Dits et écrits*, 2:762).

5. A partial version of this interview was recently published in French; see Eric Aeschmann, "Michel Foucault, l'Iran et le pouvoir du spirituel : L'entretien BibliObs inédit de 1979," *BibliObs*, 7 Feb. 2018, [bibliobs.nouvelobs.com/idees/20180207.OBS1864/michel-foucault-l-iran-et-le-pouvoir-du-spirituel-l-entretien-inedit-de-1979.html](https://bibliobs.nouvelobs.com/idees/20180207.OBS1864/michel-foucault-l-iran-et-le-pouvoir-du-spirituel-l-entretien-inedit-de-1979.html)

6. Foucault, "Political Spirituality as the Will for Alterity: An Interview with the *Nouvel Observateur*," trans. Sabina Vaccarino Bremner, *Critical Inquiry* 47 (Autumn 2020): 000–000; hereafter abbreviated "P."

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being, or to the transformations a subject must undertake on himself in order to access this way of being.<sup>7</sup> That is, the notion of spirituality as a mode of self-transformation, one not necessarily religious in nature, is one that remains central for Foucault. Moreover, as this interview makes newly explicit Foucault's concept of spirituality may have originated from his experiences in Iran;<sup>8</sup> indeed, this text marks the first instance in Foucault's extant writings in which he attributes spirituality to "Greek civilization" ("P," p. 000).<sup>9</sup> Consequently, affirming the political spirituality of the Iranian uprising is not equivalent to elevating "jihadist" ideology over Western values, as some have suggested;<sup>10</sup> instead, spirituality can arguably be construed as the organizing concept for Foucault's ethical period, from the Iranian Revolution to Greco-Roman antiquity to the historical course of Enlightenment thought itself.<sup>11</sup>

Yet, even as his newly elaborated conception of spirituality anticipates what will follow in the final phase of his thought, Foucault also seems invested in resituating it in continuity with his prior concerns, particularly madness. Noting the influence of Maurice Blanchot and Georges Bataille, Foucault

7. Foucault, "L'Éthique du souci de soi comme pratique de la liberté," *Dits et écrits*, 2:1541. Compare to the definition of spirituality Foucault gives in the opening lecture of the *Hermeneutics of the Subject* to characterize the ancient care of the self: "Spirituality . . . postulates that the subject must alter herself, transform herself, displace herself, becoming, to a certain extent and up to a certain point, other than herself, in order to have access to the truth" (Foucault, "Cours du 6 janvier 1982," *L'Herméneutique du sujet*, ed. Frédéric Gros [Paris, 2001], p. 17).

8. Foucault appears to use *political spirituality* for the first time in May 1978, where it refers to the will to govern oneself and others differently, which in turn necessitates a new division between truth and falsity; see Foucault, "Table ronde du 20 mai 1978," *Dits et écrits*, 2:278, 849. However, it is possible that this concept was added to the original text Foucault included after Iran, prior to its publication in 1980; see Julien Cavagnis, "Michel Foucault et le soulèvement iranien de 1978: Retour sur la notion de 'spiritualité politique,'" *Cahiers philosophiques* 130 (Fall 2012): 53.

9. There is also evidence that Foucault may have read Pierre Hadot's "Spiritual Exercises" (1977) prior to his travels to Iran—a text that proved pivotal for his mature conception of spirituality. Indeed, his reference to Greek civilization below indicates that the two notions—political spirituality and ancient spiritual exercises—may have been intertwined from the start. See Pierre Hadot, "Exercices spirituels," in *Exercices spirituels et philosophie antique* (Paris, 2010), pp. 19–74. For discussion of Foucault's familiarization with Hadot that took place as early as 1977, see Arnold I. Davidson, "Spiritual Exercises and Ancient Philosophy: An Introduction to Pierre Hadot," *Critical Inquiry* 16 (Spring 1990): 480–81.

10. See Afary and Anderson, *Foucault and the Iranian Revolution*, pp. 43–63.

11. As Foucault expressly points out in *The Hermeneutics of the Subject*, "From Kant on, I think that we will see that the structures of spirituality have not disappeared, neither from philosophical reflection nor from knowledge. . . . Let's take up again all of nineteenth century philosophy—or almost all: Hegel at any rate, Schelling, Schopenhauer, Nietzsche, Husserl in the *Krisis*, Heidegger as well—and you'll see just how, there as well, whether [spirituality] is disqualified, devalorized, regarded critically, or on the contrary exalted as in Hegel, . . . knowledge—the act of knowledge—remains tied up with the requirements of spirituality" (Foucault, *L'Herméneutique du sujet*, p. 29). Compare to Foucault's attribution, in the concluding sentence of the lecture course, of the *Phenomenology of Spirit* as "the apex of that philosophy" of spirituality (p. 467).

emphasizes, in particular, Bataille's conception of experience as the subject's own "risking no longer being oneself"—a notion, Foucault suggests, that prefigures his own conception of spirituality ("P," p. 000). In fact, Foucault proclaims that his life's work has been only "to describe this experience"—the history of madness, for example, is to be understood as the "experience by which the West risked and constituted its own status," securing the status of reason as the subject against madness as the object of knowledge ("P," p. 000). Thus, the notion of spirituality Foucault elaborates below can be aligned, not just with his later writings on the Greco-Roman care of the self, but also with his earlier writings on madness and psychiatry.

While the interview affirms Foucault's intellectual commitment to the relevance of the notion of political spirituality to the Iranian uprisings, it also features several of Foucault's responses to his critics. In particular, Foucault acknowledges here the "troubling and dangerous aspects" of how an Iranian Islamic government was conceived, conceding that from the moment Iranians aim to reorganize their society "as a religious state, or as a state religion, there's a risk of fanaticism" ("P," p. 000). However, Foucault reaffirms his conviction that the subjects of the revolution, the Iranians, should be able to experiment with their own religious and cultural heritage, to see "if they can pull something out of Islam, which right now is simultaneously their tradition, the form of their national conscience, their weapon for battle, and the principle of their uprising, that can allow them to avoid these dangers" ("P," p. 000). Thus, Foucault concludes that the appropriate task for those external to the uprisings, particularly Western intellectuals, is not to "condemn" Iranians in their search for new structures of spirituality, but to "see how to work within [the] terms" of this attempt ("P," p. 000). It is within this general rubric that Foucault's stance on Iran should be understood: that is, that the philosopher or intellectual's role is not to approve or disapprove of the way in which subjects choose to rise up against oppressive powers, nor to evaluate the success of such efforts on the basis of whether the consequences that follow are favorable or unfavorable, but to draw attention to the experimentation of new practices of selfhood, what Foucault also refers to as the *will for alterity*, without always knowing the eventual outcome of such experiments.<sup>12</sup> This posture characterizes Foucault's politics and ethics more generally.<sup>13</sup>

12. It is helpful to compare Foucault's reflections here with the remarks he advances in his final statement on Iran to be published in 1979 in French. Here, Foucault proclaims that his "theoretical morality" is "antistrategic: to be respectful when a singularity rises up" (Foucault, "Inutile de se soulever?" *Dits et écrits*, 2:794).

13. On the sense in which Foucault understands himself to be a "moralist," the three "principles" of Foucault's "ethics," and the nonprescriptive role accorded to the intellectual or

The interview is dated to 3 January 1979, thirteen days prior to the shah's exile and the beginning of the new regime. The interviewer, and the circumstances in which the interview was conducted, remain unknown, although it appears to have been conducted for *Le Nouvel Observateur*. The interview remained unpublished in the Paris home Foucault shared with partner Daniel Defert until 2013, when Defert sold nearly one hundred boxes of Foucault's notes and unpublished materials, including this interview, the original notebooks in which Foucault scrawled his observations on the ground in Iran, and the original clippings of Foucault's articles from *Corriere della Sera*, to the National Library of France. These materials have since been available there for researchers to consult on location, where I found the interview in the summer of 2017.

It remains unknown why the interview was not published earlier, particularly when Foucault was still alive. It is notable, however, that it constitutes one of Foucault's final pronouncements on Iran in French during his lifetime.<sup>14</sup> After 1979, Foucault never again invokes the term *political spirituality*. However, Foucault comes to conceive of philosophy as a critical ontology of the present, arguably the same conception that motivated his philosophical dispatches from Iran. Although he never uses the term *philosophical journalism* again,<sup>15</sup> Foucault becomes increasingly preoccupied with the tradition of philosophers engaging with the question of the present in newspaper pages, particularly Immanuel Kant's and Moses Mendelssohn's *reportages* in the *Berlinische Monatsschrift*, one of the mass newspapers of the time.<sup>16</sup>

Forty years after this interview was initially conducted, we are arguably in a position to see the merits of Foucault's claims. Foucault's conception of political spirituality aims not to pronounce on any particular instance of a subject's rising up against an oppressive power but to observe and support this attempt in spite of the impossibility of knowing its consequences in advance. Although Foucault has been criticized for speaking *in place of*

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philosopher in proceeding with these principles, see Foucault, "Interview de Michel Foucault, 3 novembre 1980," *L'origine de l'hérméneutique de soi: Conférences prononcées à Dartmouth College, 1980*, ed. Henri-Paul Fruchaud and Daniele Lorenzini (Paris, 2013), pp. 143–55.

14. Foucault conducted a final interview on the topic, which only appeared in Arabic, in August 1979; see Foucault and Farès Sassine, "There Can't Be Societies without Uprisings," in *Foucault and the Making of Subjects*, ed. Laura Cremonesi et al. (Lanham, Md., 2016), pp. 25–51.

15. Foucault even opts to eliminate his characterization of Kant's and Mendelssohn's contributions to the *Berlinische Monatsschrift* as "inaugurating a 'philosophical journalism'" when he reprints his 1978 introduction to Georges Canguilhem's *The Normal and the Pathological* (1984), leaving the rest of his discussion otherwise intact (Foucault, "Qu'est-ce que la critique?" suivi de "La culture de soi," ed. Fruchaud and Lorenzini [Paris, 2015], pp. 71–72, n. 12).

16. See Foucault, "Leçon du 5 janvier 1983," *Le Gouvernement de soi et des autres: Cours au Collège de France (1982–1983)*, ed. Frédéric Gross (Paris, 2008), pp. 9–22 and "Qu'est-ce que les Lumières?" *Dits et écrits*, 2:1381–97.

Iranians (given his alleged sympathy for the new regime), his aim—whether ultimately well realized or not—was to give those he met a platform to speak, both in his specific observations on the events witnessed in Iran and in the philosophical consequences he derived from these experiences.<sup>17</sup> Indeed, given the continued importance of political upheavals in contemporary society, Foucault's ultimate conclusion from all that transpired—that “there is no subject of history,” that the “characteristic phenomenon of our time” is the “insurrection of subjects that don't want to be subjected to the subject of history”—may seem even more timely now than forty years ago (“P,” p. 000).

17. “The contemporary world . . . is swarming with the ideas . . . of people which, to date, history has almost never conditioned to speak or to make themselves heard” (Foucault, “Les ‘Reportages’ d'idées,” *Dits et écrits*, 2:707).

# Political Spirituality as the Will for Alterity: An Interview with the *Nouvel Observateur*

Michel Foucault

Translated by Sabina Vaccarino Bremner

NOUVEL OBSERVATEUR: Michel Foucault, you wrote in the *Nouvel Observateur*, on the occasion of your reports [*reportage*] on Iran, that this country was currently looking for something that we others, Westerners, had lost since the Renaissance and the crisis of Christianity. You've called this thing "political spirituality." Now, it so happens that this expression surprised many people. I think that perhaps you should explain yourself on this point.

MICHEL FOUCAULT: My first move would be to shift the responsibility to respond back to those individuals. An anecdote:

When I was in Iran, a newsmagazine (which wasn't yours) had sent a reporter who had written an article which ended—like all articles on Iran—with a certain insistence on the religious movements that seemed to traverse the whole Iranian population. I read this article before it left for Paris. During its printing in Paris, the editors added the adjective *fanatic*.

Now, is it up to those who are trying to grasp what's happening in Iran, to announce the existence of this religious or spiritual movement, to justify themselves?

1. The interviewer is referring to one of Michel Foucault's dispatches from Iran that appeared in *Corriere della Sera* in 1978, which, at that time, was Michel Foucault's only other invocation of the notion of political spirituality to describe Iran; see Michel Foucault, "À quoi rêvent les Iraniens?" *Dits et écrits*, ed. François Ewald, Daniel Defert, and Jacques Lagrange, 2 vols. (Paris, 2001), 2: 694. For Foucault's reports on Iran for *Corriere della Sera*, see the appendix to Janet Afary and Kevin B. Anderson, *Foucault and the Iranian Revolution: Gender and the Seductions of Islamism* (Chicago, 2005).

Shouldn't it instead be up to those who react with such hostility to explain the reasons that lead them to be so resistant?

NOUVEL OBSERVATEUR: Right. We'll consider both sides, but for your part, when you employ the expression "political spirituality," which is charged with so many connotations—especially the second word—in our traditions and in our minds, could you explain what you mean by that? Is this expression merely descriptive in nature?

FOUCAULT: I tried to find out what had been, and still is, the force that can confront an appalling, terrible regime—and terribly strong, as it has an army and an absolutely immense police force—with a whole population, who are barehanded, since they are unarmed. I don't know if they hide arms somewhere, but they must hide them well, and they must not have too many of them, as they haven't used any so far, even though there are dozens and dozens of deaths each day.

So, what is that force that involves both a fierce, obstinate will to rise up, renewed on a daily basis, and the acceptance of sacrifice, the very sacrifices of the individuals themselves who are willing to die?

It's clear that we shouldn't be looking for it in a political ideology like Marxism, nor in a sort of revolutionary ideology in the Western sense of the term, but elsewhere.

NOUVEL OBSERVATEUR: For what it's worth, the hypothesis most commonly advanced in Europe to explain the Iranian crisis is a too-rapid modernization. So why should we truss up this reality with transcendental explanations?

FOUCAULT: First, it's not trussing up; second, they aren't transcendental!

There is a reality. They could simply say: "We don't want this modernization; this regime imposes on us a rhythm of development, political structures, that we can't tolerate; we can't pay such a price for the modernization imposed on us." But they're not saying that.

A word, first of all, on modernization. I think—and it seems to me, by the way, that what's been happening in Turkey these past few weeks proves it as well—that what is currently being rejected in Iran isn't modernization; it's antiquation. This antiquation is "Kemalism,"

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which is to say a certain type of reorganization of Muslim, Islamic, and other societies on a certain model more or less borrowed from the West and developed in the 1920s by Kemal Atatürk. The Pahlavi dynasty has always been aligned with this model—explicitly so up to 1938 or 1940 and implicitly afterwards.

Moreover, it's a fact that in the broadest sectors of the population, which is to say from the intellectuals to the workers in the factories of Abadan, from the Bazaar of Tehran to the farmers of the East of Iran in the regions furthest from the center, they really identify with people like Khomeini and religious leaders more generally.<sup>2</sup> What they really identify with is Islam, with another form of life, which isn't the old way of life compared to the modern, but a specific form of life linked to religion.

I think that's a fact; one can't deny it, and I don't know a lot of people coming back from Iran who would say the contrary.

So, the problem, it seems to me, is to know if they're just deluding themselves, if they think they're catching hold of religious values when in fact they're just explaining in the only vocabulary remaining to them a certain unease with respect to the current situation.

NOUVEL OBSERVATEUR: Is what you observed in Iran a generalizable hypothesis with respect to current events, do you think—the religious becoming in certain circumstances a dissident space of resistance to the state, and to those who embody it today in Iran?

FOUCAULT: It's a good question, since it permits me to introduce a distinction that was, for me, relatively clear, but that in all likelihood I didn't clarify enough for readers.

When I talk about spirituality, I'm not talking about religion; that is, spirituality and religion need to be appropriately distinguished. I'm stupefied to see that spirituality, spiritualism, and religion comprise a remarkable jumble, a mishmash, an impossible confusion in people's minds!<sup>3</sup>

Spirituality is something that can be found in religion, but also outside of religion; that can be found in Buddhism, a religion without theology, in monotheisms, but that can also be found in Greek civilization.<sup>4</sup> Thus, spirituality isn't necessarily bound to religion, even though most religions comprise a dimension of spirituality.<sup>5</sup>

What is spirituality?

2. Bazaar is the name given to Iran's merchant class, the workers in bazaars.

3. These two paragraphs of Foucault's response were crossed out in the original interview.

4. This seems to be the first attribution in Foucault's oeuvre of *spirituality* to ancient Greece.

5. Paragraph circled in the original interview.

I think it's a certain practice by which the individual is displaced, transformed, disrupted, to the point of renouncing their own individuality, their own subject position. It's no longer being the subject that one had been up to that point, a subject in relation to a political power, but also the subject of a certain mode of knowledge [*savoir*], subject of an experience, or subject of a belief.

It seems to me that that possibility of rising up from the subject position that had been fixed for you by a political power, a religious power, a dogma, a belief, a habit, a social structure, and so on—that's spirituality, that is, becoming other than what one is, other than oneself.

It's certain that religions are both a sort of shelter for these forms of spirituality, these practices of spirituality, as well as their restrictions. They prescribe in what way one should become other than oneself, towards what one should go, what new status one will have, and so on. In fact, religions establish a certain codification for spirituality.<sup>6</sup>

NOUVEL OBSERVATEUR: So, you emphasize the fact that Iranian Shi'ism, while it authorizes nowadays this kind of resistance to the state, comes with its own limitations.

FOUCAULT: All of the great political, social, and cultural disruptions couldn't have taken place in history without originating in a movement of spirituality.

Look at what happened at the end of the Middle Ages. After all, between the Middle Ages and the end of the sixteenth century, Europe

6. Foucault's characterization of spirituality here as distinct from, but nevertheless closely related to, religion manifests the influence of his acquaintance with Muslim conceptions of spirituality. In particular, Henry Corbin, whom Foucault read in preparation for his trip to Iran, analyzes the notion of spirituality invoked by the Islamic esoteric traditions (particularly in Islamic Gnosticism, mysticism, philosophy, and poetry) in terms of its reliance on a temporality outside of that of history and politics (what Corbin terms a "metahistory") and its appeal to a conception of religion opposed to the clerical, juridical, law-based form presupposed in Muslim social and political life; see Henry Corbin, *Corps spirituel et terre céleste: De l'Iran mazdéen à l'Iran shi'ite* (Paris, 1960), *Histoire de la philosophie islamique* (Paris, 1964), and *En Islam iranien: Aspects spirituels et philosophiques*, 4 vols. (Paris, 1971–1972). Foucault must have identified with the antijudicial resources in such a conception of spirituality to oppose dominant political and historical structures of power (including the shah's regime); moreover, the relation between subjectivity and truth that a conception of spirituality presupposes not only deviates from the contemporary Western model but does so in a way much closer to Foucault's own. On Corbin's influence on Foucault, see Laura Cremonesi et al., "Foucault, the Iranian Uprising and the Constitution of a Collective Subjectivity," *Foucault Studies* 25 (Oct. 2018): 299–311; Julien Cavagnis, "Michel Foucault et le soulèvement iranien de 1978: Retour sur la notion de 'spiritualité politique,'" *Cahiers philosophiques* 130 (Fall 2012): 51–71; and Andrea Cavazzini, "Foucault in Persia: Prima e dopo il Reportage Iraniano," in *Michel Foucault: L'Islam e la rivoluzione iraniana* (Milan, 2005), pp. 41–48. I am indebted to Haun Saussy and Daniele Lorenzini for these suggestions.

was shaken by movements that were at least as important, if not much more, than [those that took place in] the period said to be “revolutionary” between the end of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries.

Everything was really changed in beliefs, ways of life, social relations, forms of political obedience, hierarchies within society, economic practices—everything was altered. Now it’s pretty much certain—historians have shown that this movement of the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries occurred not so much within a religion, but in a movement of spirituality that disrupted the hierarchical structures of religion itself. It was religion against religion!

Whether it’s the ascetic movements of fifteenth-century Flanders, whether it’s all the types of religious communities that developed in Germany, at the same time or right after Luther (the anabaptist movement, for example), whether it’s the enormous proliferation of religious groups in seventeenth-century England that was able to disarm the English monarchy machine [*appareil*] and to carry out what proved to be the first revolution in the history of Europe—all that, I think, demonstrates quite effectively how spirituality could actually be considered the root of all the great political and cultural upheavals, and how religion could play a role, a decisive role, in this movement, which is one of spirituality rather than religion.<sup>7</sup>

That’s what I was referring to.

NOUVEL OBSERVATEUR: You know the traditional treatment that the theoretical frameworks in use in our universities for quite some time allocates to these modes of force that rise individuals up against a power that oppresses them.

The status that is assigned to these religions is one of froth, of superstructure; in short, it’s never considered in the order of explanation as an irreducible and original phenomenon.

I remember a time when, in college, I studied the Crusades, and I had to write a paper on the subject. If I had explained that the crusader who left his region of Nevers for Jerusalem went there to liberate the Tomb of Christ, I would have gotten a bad grade. If I had said

7. For more detail on the historical religious movements cited here, see Foucault, “1 March 1978,” *Security, Territory, Population: Lectures at the Collège de France 1977–1978*, trans. Graham Burchell, ed. Michel Senellart (New York, 2007), pp. 191–226. See also Foucault’s comments on the similarity between the Anabaptists and the political role of Shi’ite spirituality in Iran: “I am astonished by the connections and even the similarities that exist between Shi’ism and some of the religious movements in Europe at the end of the Middle Ages, up to the seventeenth or eighteenth centuries” (Foucault, “Dialogue between Michel Foucault and Baqir Parham,” trans. Afary, in Afary and Anderson, *Foucault and the Iranian Revolution*, p. 186).

that he was the youngest of his family, that there was a demographic boom in the West such that he was ruined and that he had nothing to live on—in other words, if I explained that he went there to expand markets and opportunities due to excessive production in the West, then my explanation would have been well received.

FOUCAULT: The problem is whether your professor was the one who should have gotten a bad grade!

I think that historians have acquired the bad habit of attributing a causal power only to a certain number of very precise and determinate elements, thus rejecting any analysis that doesn't hierarchize relations according to a blueprint borrowed as much from classical political economy as from Marxism. But that's not the important thing. It's not about saying that the factors you speak of don't exist. Instead, the problem is to know what type of reaction an individual will have when faced with his solitude, his poverty, his ejection from a social network or social whole in which he could have lived, and so on.

That's the problem: the type of response that's elicited. The nature of the stimulus will never account for the specific nature of the response that's given.

This stimulus—poverty, the existence of youngest members of the family, feudal structures, and so on—the fact that all of this rendered a certain number of individuals undesirable in medieval society, or unusable, or too mobile, will never explain why they actually carried out the Crusades, getting it into their heads that liberating the Tomb of Christ was absolutely important, not only for them, but for Christianity as a whole.

NOUVEL OBSERVATEUR: The nature of the cause never determines the nature of the response.

FOUCAULT: What I would say is that the fact that the Iranian people suffered under the economic conditions imposed on them, the intolerable regime of the police to which they were submitted, the "pillage" of their natural riches carried out under their own eyes by the power already in place on the one hand and by the Americans on the other—that's absolutely clear.

It's certain that the Islamic faith is currently the only thing that could really give to this will for spirituality—that's to say, to this will to be other than what one is—a concrete, precise form, one organizable into a political movement.<sup>8</sup>

8. "I have read several books on Islam and Shi'ism, and I totally agree with them because the role of Shi'ism in a political awakening, in maintaining political consciousness, in inciting

NOUVEL OBSERVATEUR: Is what you observed in Iran generalizable to other contemporary phenomena?

FOUCAULT: I think so. After all, revolutions without spirituality are the exception.

NOUVEL OBSERVATEUR: Can you cite any examples?

FOUCAULT: Maybe the French Revolution; I would say that it's the only one in which this kind of uprising in which people wanted to be other than what they were, in which they wanted to cease to be subjects in any sense of the word, in which the justifications that were given, the manner in which the movement unfolded, didn't borrow anything from traditional spiritual references.

NOUVEL OBSERVATEUR: It's in that sense that it could be lived as a rupture.

FOUCAULT: It was a social reorganization in which the legislator could really establish a perfect and transparent order.

It's the only revolution in which it was thought that a good system of parliamentary representation was the way to resolve problems, that a sufficiently wise and well-suited philosophy could really allow people to cease being subjects in the way they had been, by becoming subjects of universal reason, and so on.

NOUVEL OBSERVATEUR: Contrary to the English or American revolutions.

FOUCAULT: Those crises of the sixteenth century were spiritual.<sup>9</sup>

Consider the nineteenth century in Russia! Wasn't everything that paved the way for the revolution of 1917 fundamentally a spiritual movement, and wasn't the great wave of enthusiasm that brought about that phenomenon, that the Bolsheviks then took charge of, in its roots something deeply spiritual in the sense that I talked about—that is, wanting, not for the situation or the facts to change, but instead knowing that they can't be changed if one doesn't change oneself? The two are integrally connected, and it's that "becoming other" that's at the very heart of the revolutionary will.

NOUVEL OBSERVATEUR: I now would like for us to address . . .

FOUCAULT: If you'd allow me, I'd like to add something.

There's a remark from Rabaut Saint-Étienne that is very well-known and that might characterize well what I'm trying to say.

Rabaut Saint-Étienne said: "Man has to be changed, the world has to be changed, ideas have to be changed, words have to be changed,

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and fomenting political awareness, is historically undeniable. . . . On the whole, and despite changes that occurred in the nature of religion due to the proximity between Shi'ism and state power in that period, religion has nevertheless played an oppositional role" (Foucault, "Dialogue between Michel Foucault and Baqir Parham," p. 186).

9. Foucault appears to have misspoken here, since the crises to which he is referring occurred in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, not the sixteenth century.

everything has to be changed. . . . Everything has to be destroyed and recreated.”<sup>10</sup>

The first part of that sentence, that’s really spirituality: to change everything, and above all to change oneself, to become other, but essentially without knowing what that other will be—it’s that radical will for alterity with regard to oneself.

And then, when Rabaut Saint-Étienne said: “Everything should be destroyed and recreated,” he was thinking of a philosophical consciousness that would have made a clean break with all institutions, that would have recreated them on the basis of a rational system.

The first part of that sentence, that’s on the spirituality side; the second part of that sentence, that’s on the side of a philosophical revolution, with the latter having to be applied to the former.

The French Revolution was the first and the only revolution that recognized its own spirituality.<sup>11</sup>

NOUVEL OBSERVATEUR: In terms of the Iranian situation, this will for alterity, to no longer be a subject, passes through a recommitment to religious practices and nostalgias that are most readily available and most deeply anchored in their minds.

So, how do you explain this return to old practices? How can the fact, for example, that Ayatollah Khomeini can incite the destruction of movie theaters, the rejection of Westernification, the return to something very close to a traditional theocracy, be experienced as a possible alterity?<sup>12</sup> I’m not expressing myself well. How can this way of relapsing into what is the most archaic in a civilization be lived as a possibility? But you’ve actually responded to that.

FOUCAULT: This movement of spirituality uses the tools at its disposal, and the problem isn’t knowing if the tool is religious or not; the problem is knowing what the value of the tool is in relation to this will [for alterity].

NOUVEL OBSERVATEUR: How do you explain that the reactions, both in response to the article by the newspaper reporter in Iran you mentioned

10. “Tous les établissements en France couronnent le malheur du peuple: pour le rendre heureux il faut le renouveler; changer ses idées; changer ses loix; changer ses mœurs; changer les hommes; changer les choses; changer les mots. . . . Tout détruire; oui, tout détruire; puisque tout est à recréer” (quoted in Edmund Burke, *Reflections on the Revolution in France*, ed. L. G. Mitchell [New York, 2009], p. 168).

11. Here, Foucault appears to contradict what he said above: that the French Revolution was the only revolution *without* spirituality.

12. In French, the interviewer refers to “désoccidentalisation” (de-Westernification). In context, however, it seems more likely that he or she meant Occidentalization, or Westernification; the text has been changed accordingly.

and to your own reports, show such a resistance to that word? How do you explain that kind of censure—Michel Foucault talks about spirituality, and immediately everyone is up in arms, holding you in suspicion. How do you explain that?

FOUCAULT: I was a bit harsh in believing that it was ignorance, but it wasn't just ignorance. To explain why, I have to refer to something personal.

At the end of the day, I was a bit surprised that they would be surprised, since I'm completely steeped in Blanchot and Bataille. It was they who were really my teachers. I can say that what for me was a sort of point of rupture with what had been dominant during my youth was reading Sartre's article on Bataille.<sup>13</sup> It seemed to me that in Sartre's incomprehension of Bataille, there was something that to me constituted the grounds for an irreparable rupture, and ultimately the indication of something that was without doubt essential to our era. In fact, what's important for philosophy, for politics, and ultimately for us all is what Bataille called "experience"—that is, something that isn't the affirmation of the subject in the foundational continuity of their own project.<sup>14</sup> It consists instead in that rupture and that risk by which the subject accepts their own transmutation, transformation, abolition, in their relation to objects, to others, to truth, to death, and so on. That's experience. It's risking no longer being oneself.

As for me, I haven't done anything but describe this experience. What is the history of madness, if not the history of that experience by which the West both risked and constituted its own status—the status of reason as a subject in opposition to madness, finally mastered as object of knowledge?<sup>15</sup>

So, I haven't done anything but that. Ultimately, what is Western science, if not an experience in which a pure, fixed subject of rationality is constituted, capable of mastering a discourse that can be proven from start to finish, or a world that can be tested from start to finish? That's an experience.

13. See Jean-Paul Sartre, "A New Mystic: On Bataille's *Inner Experience*," trans. Chris Turner, in *We Have Only This Life to Live: The Selected Essays of Jean-Paul Sartre, 1939–1975*, ed. Ronald Aronson and Adrian van den Hoven (New York, 2013), pp. 47–82.

14. For an early interpretation of Georges Bataille, see Foucault, "A Preface to Transgression," in *Language, Counter-Memory, Practice: Selected Essays and Interviews*, trans. Donald F. Bouchard and Sherry Simon, ed. Bouchard (Ithaca, N.Y., 1980), pp. 29–52. On Foucault's articulation of his relation to Bataille and Maurice Blanchot (dating a few months prior to this interview), see Foucault, "Entretien avec Michel Foucault," in *Dits et écrits*, 2:860–69.

15. See Foucault, *History of Madness*, trans. Jonathan Murphy and Jean Khalfa, ed. Khalfa (New York, 2009).

Truth is nothing but an episode in the history of spirituality.

NOUVEL OBSERVATEUR: Now, I'd like for you to help me to reflect on something that is ultimately very similar, simply extending your line of thought.

For example, when we began to hear about Soviet dissidents, intellectuals expressed reservations precisely about what had to do with the spiritual aspects of the dissidents' attitude of resistance to the state. That was the case with Solzhenitsyn, who was reproached principally for his position of "I appeal to a traditional Christianity" to oppose the state of Kruschchev and Brejnev.

When these people arrived in the West, their struggle was commended, but at the same time many intellectuals of the left were discomfited by this spiritual dimension of their conduct.

FOUCAULT: Spiritual or religious?

NOUVEL OBSERVATEUR: Both, according to the meanings you gave to those terms.

FOUCAULT: They definitely mixed the spiritual and religious. It's definitely true that a Russian, having experienced what he had from 1917 on, can't locate in Marxism or socialism or dialectical materialism a principle for spirituality for the uprising of subjects [*soulèvement des sujets*].

NOUVEL OBSERVATEUR: Exactly.

FOUCAULT: So it's on Marxism, on socialism, on dialectical materialism, to respond to the reason why, nowadays in the Soviet Union, the uprising of the subject can only be carried out with recourse to religion.

NOUVEL OBSERVATEUR: Of course.

FOUCAULT: It's on them to respond, not on others.

NOUVEL OBSERVATEUR: From that point of view, I wasn't considering anything but a purely sociological question. I had the impression that the tenor of things tends to change on this issue.

That reservation was voiced with regard to the spiritual or religious dimension of Solzhenitsyn's conduct—speaking of which, your distinction is valid here as well—but I have the impression that, on the contrary, what's happening in Iran today leads those exact people—who, due to a certain misunderstanding, loved your reports—to find all sorts of virtues in, for instance, Ayatollah Khomeini and this return to a retrograde practice. Noble justifications are attributed to this spiritual dimension that agitates Iranians today and causes them to rise up, while the base that is ultimately propped up by all this is a religious one that should have been suspect.

FOUCAULT: Don't ask me to find reasons for what my contemporaries think; I have enough trouble trying to think of what I would like to think without having to imagine the reasons why they don't think what I do!



There is certainly a phenomenon of a somewhat superficial valorization that makes it such that whenever there's an Islamic country, we must be in favor of it. This same movement of spirituality, when you find it in Jewish contexts, elicits distrust in those we spoke of just now.

We've talked very little, for example, about what happens in Buddhist faiths and so on. As for me, to reiterate, I think that this way of elucidating [*mise à nu*] spirituality in terms of the subjects' attempt to rise up is linked to a certain number of things concerning the history of the contemporary world. Of course, the great failure of the project of a revolution that would be conceivable in scientific terms, that would lead to a rationally organized state while at the same time ensuring individual happiness, is I think one of the reasons why this will to spirituality is now reappearing in a denuded state, and why the only garment this movement can don is a religious one.

NOUVEL OBSERVATEUR: Aren't there big risks in letting them don such a garment, given that we have neither advice, nor lessons to offer?

The fact that a whole population comes to the point of fighting a form of oppressive state totalitarianism, having recourse to and ultimately hoping for a return to a religious kind of state, whatever the reasons are that lead them to do so—doesn't that also bring with it a dissaray of powers fraught with all possible and imaginable terrors?

In short, to relitigate the separation of church and state, even if those words may not apply to the situation in Iran—isn't that an enormous risk?

FOUCAULT: I think we have to be both specific and cautious.

NOUVEL OBSERVATEUR: It's clear that it's very simple, as things stand now.

There's obviously a dictatorship like the shah's with its police, that tortures, whose prisons are full and intolerable, but in opposition to that we see a whole quantity of aspirations emerging, organizing and lodging themselves in the Shi'ite religion, that risk, if the bearers of those aspirations lack the power [to realize them], giving rise to a form of fundamentalism that's totally terrifying and even more repressive. I can already see from here the crocodile tears that many will start shedding!

FOUCAULT: Let's go back, if you will, to the article I wrote.<sup>16</sup> I clearly remember having underscored the extent to which the statements by

16. "It is often said that the definitions of an Islamic government are imprecise. On the contrary, they seemed to me to have a familiar but, I must say, not too reassuring clarity. 'These are basic formulas for democracy, whether bourgeois or revolutionary,' I said. 'Since the eighteenth century now, we have not ceased to repeat them, and you know where they have

Iranians I cited in discussing this issue featured troubling and dangerous aspects; strangely, we see the mixture, in some way, of the dangers of certain Western-inspired forms of government and certain kinds of danger that are inherent to a religious government.

For example, when we ask the question, “But what about religious minorities in your Islamic government?” the response is on the one hand the classic, banal response, which we know how dangerous it is—that is, the response of the eighteenth century. They say, “Well, it’s the majority that, by formulating the law, will define what status to give to minorities.” We know what that led to. On the other hand, these same people explain to us that certain religious groups, for example the Bahá’í,<sup>17</sup> embrace a religion that is totally wrong and so depraved that tolerating them is off the agenda.

So, you can see how, at the end of the day, the Western rationalist thought characterizing this sort of Jacobin democracy comes to, in some way, reinforce the dangers of religious fundamentalism. These dangers dwell alongside each other, together threatening the Iranian movement, just as, after all, they also threaten many other movements.

Iranians are perfectly conscious of all this—not all of them, but those I’ve been able to talk at some length with. They know all this perfectly well; their problem is to find out if they can pull something out of Islam, which right now is simultaneously their tradition, the form of their national conscience, their weapon for battle, and the principle of their uprising, that can allow them to avoid these dangers.

So, I don’t think it will be about telling them continuously, “But you’re falling back on an Islam that bears all the risks of fundamentalism, that in any case is a monotheistic religion and therefore intolerant,” and so on—I don’t think dismissing them aggressively on those grounds, accusing them of fanaticism, will lead anywhere. They’re not fanatic, but it’s absolutely true that, from the moment this movement comes to organize itself as a religious state, or as a state religion, there’s a risk of fanaticism.

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led” (Foucault, “What Are the Iranians Dreaming About?” trans. Karen de Bruin et al., in Afary and Anderson, *Foucault and the Iranian Revolution*, p. 206); “There were demonstrations, verbal at least, of violent anti-Semitism. There were demonstrations of xenophobia and directed not only at the Americans, but also at foreign workers who had come to work in Iran” (Foucault, “Iran: The Spirit of a World Without Spirit: Foucault’s Conversation with Claire Brière and Pierre Blanchet,” trans. Alan Sheridan, in Afary and Anderson, *Foucault and the Iranian Revolution*, p. 259).

17. In the original transcript, *Bahá’í* appears as *Mahí*, accompanied by a question mark. It seems likely that Foucault is here referring to followers of the Bahá’í faith, whose toleration in the region remains highly contested. I am indebted to Behrooz Ghamari-Tabrizi for this suggestion.

The issue is to find out, in the contemporary world—here I'm talking for Iranians, but also for whomever else—what can be done with this will for spirituality which is reappearing in a denuded state beneath the ruins of the grand revolutionary hopes, and that here manifests in Islam, there in a certain form of Christianity.

NOUVEL OBSERVATEUR: In the election of a Polish pope?

FOUCAULT: Possibly—or in environmentalism and so on.

There are a thousand forms of it: sometimes aberrant, fairly often troubling, sometimes touching, sometimes naive, sometimes subtle, but always very insistent throughout the contemporary world.

NOUVEL OBSERVATEUR: And the cults [sectes]?

FOUCAULT: And what can we do about that?

Rather than condemn them in the name of an ideology that has actually betrayed this whole immense effort for spirituality, rather than condemn them on that count—let's see how to work within its terms. It's in this sense that the idea of a preoccupation with spirituality, as Bataille suggested twenty years ago, seemed to me something that is still completely relevant. At any rate, that's what I'm fighting for.

NOUVEL OBSERVATEUR: To conclude, I'd like you to develop that idea: What can we do about that? How should we deal with it? What's at our disposal to grasp it, conceive of it, receive it?

FOUCAULT: It took two centuries for a spirituality to arise within Christianity that was still Christian but turned completely against the church, and that could change some, or even—to put it frankly—many things in the West.

Right now, in the ruins we're in, I don't think ten or fifteen years will be long enough to see exactly what that will be. The era of the Brethren of the Common Life, of the Anabaptists, the Taborites, and so on, that will begin again, but not in a religious form, even if there will also be religious forms of it; it will be an immense experimentation that will last at least a century, if not more.

That's what we have to do!

NOUVEL OBSERVATEUR: We'll have to wait.

FOUCAULT: No, not wait—do, practice!

Rising up must be practiced, by which I mean one must practice rejecting the subject status in which one finds oneself, the rejection of one's identity, the rejection of one's own permanence, the rejection of what one is. It's the first condition for rejecting the world.

NOUVEL OBSERVATEUR: Is that what should be expected from phenomena as odd and heterogeneous from one another as collective suicide?

FOUCAULT: I see the enormity of the trap that you're laying for me!

NOUVEL OBSERVATEUR: Whether we want it to or not, [what you describe] pronounces itself in support of what I was just talking about or seems

to be of the same nature. I don't know exactly what this nature is, but it's peculiar all the same. Don't you see a kind of similarity when it comes to this will to become other, to rise up? What is this similarity?

FOUCAULT: It would perhaps be too general to say that what has disappeared is this idea, arising around the eighteenth century, a little before the French Revolution, that there was a subject of history.

This subject of history has been reason, humanity, man, and so on—society as well.

We now know that there is no subject of history. History doesn't bring a subject along with it, and the subject doesn't bring history along with itself. I think that's what's being made manifest right now. This kind of insurrection of subjects that don't want to be subjected to the subject of history—it's that, I think, which is the characteristic phenomenon of our time.

NOUVEL OBSERVATEUR: Good. Personally, I think the interview can end there. Thank you.