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Thinking with Foucault Beyond Christianity and the Secular: Notes on Religious Governmentality and Buddhist Monasticism

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ABSTRACT

In Michel Foucault's original formulation of the concept, governmentality is intrinsically linked to religious practices and institutions. Although Christian practices associated with the pastorate and monasticism feature prominently as precursors of modern administration and statecraft in his oeuvre, later works that employ the concept have overwhelmingly focused on the secular, and rational-scientific side of governmentality. This essay argues that by transposing governmentality to a non-European context, and by fleshing out a comparative perspectives beyond Christianity and the secular, it might be possible to recover some of the original religious implications of the concept. With reference to Theravāda Buddhism in Southeast Asia, the essay briefly discusses the potential role of monks and monasteries in establishing religious and monastic governmentality. Although there are obviously vast differences between Christianity and Buddhism, the essay concludes that exploring these 'alternative governmentalities' comparatively allows for novel interpretations beyond the secular religion divide and alleged Western rationality.

KEYWORDS

Christianity; Buddhism; governmentality; monasticism; Foucault; comparison; secular

Governmentality as secular Western rationality?

Many discussions on modern statecraft, rule and administration have been stimulated by the concept of governmentality. Michel Foucault's original formulation, and its numerous subsequent reinterpretations, have mostly focused on the rational-scientific and secular implications of strategies of population management such as schooling, policing, and bio-political measures designed to preserve and enhance the productivity of the body politic. Religion has rarely been integrated into what has now become known as "governmentality studies." Although in philosophy and social theory there is now a resurgence of scholarship that aims at reconnecting the notion of governmentality with religion, the most influential works in governmentality studies by Michell Dean, Nikolas Rose and Thomas Lemke neglect religion.[1] Depending on area and research context, there might indeed be little need to focus on religion, and studies of, for example, biotech issues would have to substantially stretch the category of religion. Nevertheless,

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[1]Dean, *Governmentality*; Rose, *The Politics of Life*; Lemke, *Eine Kritik*.

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governmentality studies in general understands population management and biopolitics as secular-scientific enterprises. Jeremy Carrette is right to observe that in much of the research "often neglected is the extent of Foucault's fascination with issues of Christianity and religion."[2]

Studying Theravāda Buddhism in Southeast Asia from a historical and anthropological perspective, I was often surprised to what extent much of the scholarship in my field of research has focused on rational and modern ways of governing through policing, health politics and so forth, and thereby pushed the significance of religion into the background. Why is this? First, anthropological studies of religion often conceptualized religion as a reservoir of resistance and "as an authentic dimension of subaltern culture" that allows people to escape the powerful grid of modern governmentality.[3] Such research replicates a division of the secular and the religious sphere, with the latter acting as a haven unpolluted by secular governmentality. Religion may need to be controlled, but it is not a productive and essential device for establishing and maintaining governmentality.

Secondly, despite Foucault's overwhelming prominence in historical and anthropological studies of colonialism in the 1990s, postcolonial approaches have questioned the validity of Foucault's theoretical apparatus, which is firmly rooted in the Western canon. Foucault has been "widely criticized for alleged Eurocentrism" and his "scrupulous silence" on colonialism.[4] Less harsh, but nevertheless critical, is Gyan Prakash's assessment that while Foucault is Eurocentric, more importantly in British India governance was "radically discontinuous with the Western norm" and that "colonial governmentality could not be the tropicalization of its Western form, but rather was its fundamental dislocation."[5] Scholars of colonialism have countered readings of governmentality which portray it as reinforcing rational modes of governing. Instead, as Peter Pels suggests, not only are external (Western) models imposed upon (Indigenous) local realities, but there is a complex relational process of mutual exchanges and struggles from which "alternative governmentalities," as can emerge.[6] Understanding the abovementioned critiques not as mere rejections but as challenges, I believe that the dislocation of governmentality into contexts outside of Foucault's focus on Western modernity could allow for a critical reevaluation of the concept beyond a Western secular rationality.[7]

Reading Foucault with one of his own methods, genealogy, this marginalization of religion comes as a surprise, as in the late 1970s he worked systematically on religion. Especially in his later works, Foucault argued that the Christian notion of the pastorate is at the basis of modern governmentality.[8] He defines the Christian pastorate as the "art of conducting, directing, leading, guiding, taking in hand, and manipulating men … collectively and individually throughout their life."[9] Most importantly for my argument is that Foucault outlines that the Christian pastorate forms both the "background" and the "prelude" to more modern forms of government, and he proposes that the latter

[2]Carrette, *Religion and Culture. Michel Foucault*, 2.
[3]Ortner, "Resistance," 181.
[4]Young, *Postcolonialism*, 397.
[5]Prakash, *Another Reason*, 125.
[6]Pels, "The Anthropology of Colonialism," 177.
[7]Cf. Legg and Heath, *South Asian Governmentalities*.
[8]Foucault, *Security, Territory, Population*, 147f.
[9]Ibid., 165.

very much "arise on the basis" of it.[10] How should we understand terms like "background," "prelude" and "basis" here? Consider how the modern welfare state, aiming at the protection and well-being of its citizens, did not break completely with religious motives and institutions but "translated" them into secular governmentality.[11] Consider also how Foucault's studies of psychiatric institutions and other instruments of the state reveal direct connections with religion, and Jeremy Carette rightly suggests that Foucault "is aware of a very complex interrelationship between military, religious and educational structures."[12] *Discipline and Punish*, for example, represents monasticism as a transformed source of disciplinary powers that in the eighteenth century "became general formulas of domination."[13] Foucault acknowledges that schooling was originally based on monastic models, and he suggests that the first factories were "explicitly compared with the monastery."[14]

How were the connections between religion and governmentality overlooked? In most studies of colonial and modern governmentality, the traces of the ideas and practices that derive from religion have been largely effaced. This becomes obvious in Foucault's famous governmentality essay, which somehow sidesteps pastoral power and religion due to its limited historical focus and reads as a genealogy of entirely secular forms of governing. This has, according to Christina Petterson, "generated an understanding of pastoral power as a purely religious form of power, over, against and distinct from governmentality, which is understood as secular."[15] Although his lectures at the Collège de France reveal a more complex genealogy of the arts of governing, it seems as if in Foucault's general notion of governmentality the religious gets neatly differentiated from the secular. One could also link this to Carl Schmitt's famous and programmatic definition of political theology, which postulates that "All significant concepts of the modern theory of the state are secularized theological concepts."[16] Like in Foucault's abbreviated account of governmentality, secularization and modernity have allegedly overwritten the religious origins of governmentality. What does this overwriting and effacement imply? In a piece that takes stock of the recent trends in the research on political theology, Faisal Devji proposes that this is a process that is hierarchically ordered with respect to the relation of religion and the secular:

> This implies a structure of concealment, whether deliberate or not, that hides the theological behind the secular. But while a great deal of work on political theology aims at revealing the term's second part from the concealment of its first, little of it actually focuses on the structure of hiddenness … .[17]

Giorgio Agamben's project – exemplified in his *Homo Sacer* series – presents a genealogy of Western political and theological sovereignty that focuses on the structure of this hiddenness.[18] Like Foucault, Agamben uses his philosophical reflections on historical and theological material to outline a genealogy of modern governance, whose origins today

[10]Ibid., 184, 193.
[11]Sander, Villadsen, and Wyller, *The Spaces of Others*, 12.
[12]Carrette, *Foucault and Religion*, 118.
[13]Foucault, *Discipline and Punish*, 137.
[14]Ibid., 142.
[15]Petterson, "Colonial Subjectification," 91.
[16]Schmitt, *Political Theology*, 68.
[17]"The State of Political Theology," 547.
[18]Agamben, *The Kingdom and the Glory*; Agamben, *The Highest Poverty*.

are largely hidden. Moreover, both employ this for throwing a critical light on the *present* state of affairs.

But what about studies that are less concerned with criticism of the present from a history of ideas and philosophy perspective and merely want to apply the notion of governmentality to historical or ethnographic research? Can the displacement of governmentality into non-Western and non-Christian contexts help us to re-inject religion into governmentality, without necessarily focusing on the hiddenness and effacement of religion behind the secular? Can these alternative governmentalities resulting from a de-centering of the notion reveal to us a less hidden, but more open and exposed relationship between religion and governmentality?

Beyond complaisant calls for widening political theology beyond the West and Christianity, a systematic analysis of political theologies applied to Buddhism would demand a complete re-contextualization of the notion, a rewarding but huge endeavor beyond the scope of this essay. What is possible, however, is to read Foucault as a political theologian by taking into account his works on religion. I suggest to do this by breaking down both notions – political theology and governmentality – and by starting on a more limited scale, which can open comparative angles. I will do this with some rather short-cut excursions into Buddhist monasticism and the roles of monks in Laos and Thailand. Although both countries are now modern nation-states, the separation of religion and the secular sphere is much less clear cut there than in many Western examples, the relationship between the two is therefore less hidden.

The following rudimentary comparative remarks on monasticism might be justified by the fact that the latter plays an important role in Foucault's excursions into Christianity and in his genealogy of governmentality. A weakness of Foucault's approach may here be turned in to a strength: His excursions into monasticism are much less concerned with theological content than with concrete practices and their subsequent impact beyond the monastery walls. For example, Foucault describes Cassian's foundational texts as "a compendium of practices": they detail how life in the monastery should be ordered and lived.[19] For example, he outlines the tests which a novice has to undergo as part of initiation into monastic life. These trainings in subjectification, Foucault postulates, are "at the very heart of not only Christian monastic institutions, but of a whole series of practices, of apparatuses (dispositiv), what will inform what constitutes Christian, and, as a result, Western subjectivity."[20] Foucault does not look too much at the theological ideas that stand at the basis of the pastorate and later ideas of governmentality, but rather at concrete practices and institutions. While juxtaposing Christian and Buddhist ideas about salvation, truth-speaking and morality might be a project worth pursuing, I think that this (admittedly superficial) "structuralist-institutionalist" approach is better suited for the short comparative endeavor I suggest here.

Monastic governmentality in Buddhism

The comparative potential of monasticism first came to my mind when during my PhD fieldwork I spent three months as a Buddhist monk in a monastery in Laos. There I

[19]Foucault, *On the Government*, 261–2.
[20]Ibid., 266.

immediately found myself in a restricted and highly regulated social space. I indeed perceived the monastery as a social institution in which disciplinary practices are simultaneously enacted on oneself and by oneself, and which then diffuse in transmuted form into the wider social body beyond the monastery.[21] A crucial difference is here that monasticism in Thailand, Laos, Cambodia and Burma is much more widespread than in Western Christianity and monasteries can be found even in most midsized villages. The monastery is like a village church, with at least one monk and several novices continuously present there. Moreover, *temporary* ordination of young boys and men is still widely practiced, and many spend between a few months and several years in the monastery before they find their own family. Moreover, elderly laypeople also often ordain temporarily after they have fulfilled their familial roles.

One important focus of Foucault's work is the transmission of originally monastic ideas and practices into larger society. Foucault sees monasteries as closed social units (like the army) in which modes of disciplining developed that later entered the wider social body.[22] Moreover, he proposes that some values originally linked to asceticism cross from the monastery into the quotidian of society.[23] Or, as Max Weber labels it, monks spread "corresponding attitudes among the religious laymen" beyond the confines of the monastery.[24] As many young boys and men ordain for a few years, and then again disrobe, the border between monastic and lay-life is in Southeast Asian Theravāda Buddhism much more permeable than in Foucault's account of Christianity. This enables monastic attitudes and values to cross more easily into society at large.[25]

Beyond life in the monastery itself, monks occupy a plethora of ritual and social roles, and I think it is here plausible to transfer Foucault's insight into early Christian forms of governing as the conducting, directing and guiding of the laity by a priest or a monk to Buddhism. Although adherence to such practices vary widely today, Buddhist monks in Laos and Thailand continue to "act as teachers, religious guides, and mentors, and provide the model of moral conduct which the people regard as an ideal to be striven for … ."[26] Congruently, Indrani Chatterjee argues from a longue durée perspective that in South Asia, Hinduism and Buddhism were marked by a "monastic governmentality" where a religious teacher presided over a cluster of pupils and disciples who through this contact were trained and subjectified.[27]

Applying the notion of religious and monastic governmentality to the pre-modern and colonial era, one has to take into account that in rural Southeast Asia, Buddhist monks act as "peasant intellectuals" who, before the arrival of the state school system, taught reading and writing to children. Temples were basically the only available schools before the colonial era, and even today children of poor peasants from remote regions still attend monastery schools. Significantly, the French clearly recognized this when they colonized Cambodia and Laos in the nineteenth century. The secular policies advanced in France since 1905, when then strict separation of religion and state was given expression in the concept of laïcité, never reached the colonies. Instead, one could say in

[21]Cf. Voyce, *Foucault, Buddhism and Disciplinary*.
[22]Foucault, *Discipline and Punish*, 150.
[23]Foucault, *Histoire de la sexualité*, 243.
[24]Weber, *Economy and Society*, 173.
[25]Kourilsky and Ladwig, "Governing the Monastic Order," 203f.
[26]Suksaram, "Buddhism, Political Authority," 103.
[27]Chatterjee, "Monastic Governmentality," 57.

perfect Foucauldian manner, the French actively built the school system on an already existing networks of Buddhist monasteries.[28] Indeed, French colonial policies in Laos and Cambodia actively supported Buddhism in order to establish colonial governmentality, including through renovations of temples and monuments, book printing and the higher education of monks were supported, and Buddhist state rituals.[29] The secularism that was preached in the metropole was completely ignored in the colonies where there was a substantial overlap of secular and religious forms of governmentality. While "scientific" measures linked to health politics and agriculture were also important, in Laos and Cambodia Buddhism was crucial for establishing an "alternative governmentality" beyond the secular-religion divide.

In pre-modern Southeast Asia, Buddhist monasteries also played a crucial role in establishing political and social cohesion. Monasteries gave Buddhist kings and governors networks for controlling the population. In Burma, these networks and their influence on the population "allowed the imperial courts, perhaps for the first time, a permanent and in some cases even a direct access to the sphere of local matters."[30] This process to a certain extent continues into the present in secular nation states of Thailand and Laos. What Petterson states for Lutheran Christianity and its role in "civilizing" Greenlandic indigenous people in the colonial context of the twentieth century can also be transferred to current developments in my fieldsite in Laos, where originally animist minorities ("hill-tribes") are "civilized" through Buddhism.[31] By ordaining and attending monastery schools, these minorities are integrated into the modern Lao nation-state and ethnic Lao culture that, after the decline of a multi-ethnic socialism in Laos, is now again very much defined in Buddhist terms.[32] Secular and religious governmentality are here not neatly separated but instead reinforce each other and go hand-in-hand.

Conclusion

Instead of a systematic comparison of Christianity and Buddhism in terms of governmentality, the aim of this short essay has merely been to present some elementary ideas on how Foucault's ideas on religion and monasticism can be transferred to a non-Christian context. I have argued that in Southeast Asian Buddhism, religion and monasticism do not simply feature as distant and hidden genealogies, but that colonial and modern governmentality were and are grounded in regular crossings between the secular and the religious sphere. Reading Foucault's work on Christianity and monasticism in this context allowed me to develop a tentative notion of religious governmentality that is not tied to its Christian genealogy, but one that complicates the secular-religion divide perpetuated in much of the research in governmentality studies. Therefore, the displacing of governmentality into a non-Western and non-Christian context can here be considered a testing ground for expanding and critically reviewing the notion itself. Research into these "alternative governmentalities" for sure demands a more rigid

[28]Ladwig, "The Genesis and Demarcation."
[29]Ladwig, "Imitations of Buddhist Statecraft."
[30]Kulke, *Kings and Cults*, 292.
[31]Petterson, "Colonial Subjectification," 94.
[32]Ladwig, "Religious Place Making."

comparative apparatus than I could present here, but I hope that my remarks can help Foucault and theories of governmentality to come out of their Christian and secular closets.

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