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Foucault, Discipline and the Self: Exploring Mary's Relationship with God in The Nativity Story

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Abstract

The Nativity Story has been the most recent film depicting Mary, Joseph and the baby Jesus. The paper explores what films depicting biblical characters may reveal about the psychological experiences they undergo. For example, how does Mary benefit from the virgin conception? How does she use the pregnancy to transform herself? I employ Michel Foucault's ideas concerning disciplinary regimes and 'technologies of the self' to attempt to answer these questions. I argue that, in the film, the moment at which Mary is used to achieve God's purposes, she enters into a disciplinary relationship with God. She also uses her pregnancy to transform herself. Jesus is the technology by which Mary attains self-fulfillment.

The Nativity Story has been the most recent film depicting Mary, Joseph and the baby Jesus.[1] Filmed before majestic Italian and Moroccan backdrops, *Nativity* is a fresh retelling of the epic story. The film takes the biblical infancy stories literally and melds them into one continuous narrative. In this paper, I am little concerned with criticizing such a literal rendering of scripture and am more interested in what films depicting scriptural characters may reveal about the psycho-social experiences they undergo. For example, what was the nature of Mary's relationship with God? What purpose did the virgin conception serve for Mary? How does she benefit? How does she use the pregnancy to transform herself as a person? To attempt an answer to these questions, I turn to the writings of Michel Foucault.

The tools that I employ for this paper are Foucault's writings on disciplinary regimes as well as his later work on technologies of the self. I argue that, in *The Nativity Story*, the moment at which Mary consents to being used to achieve God's purposes she enters into a disciplinary relationship with God. In a sense, she enters a panopticon, which fundamentally alters the way she acts from then onwards. It is important to note that the question of whether God would have rescinded the gift if Mary had been ungrateful is irrelevant. Mary felt blessed and engages in self-surveillance to ensure that she is worthy of the gift given her. At the same time, she uses her pregnancy to transform herself. Jesus is the technology by which Mary

attains self-fulfillment. The film intimately depicts her emotional and psychological transformation from a poor, first-century girl in Palestine to a carrier of a new message for humanity. I first turn to a discussion of Foucault's writings on disciplinary structures and technologies of the self before exploring how his ideas may shed light on Mary's relationship with God and the baby Jesus in *The Nativity Story*.

Foucault: Discipline and Technologies of the Self

Foucault's early writings center around what he calls an 'archaeology' of thought, an attempt to uncover historical constraints on what individuals may think and say. Archaeology attempts to discover the underlying and unwritten rules that allow certain statements to be deemed authoritative. It is a purely descriptive exercise that has the potential to tell us much about the intellectual climate of a particular time. For example, what can we learn from the fact that, for centuries, the statement, 'the sun orbits the earth,' would have been deemed authoritative? For Foucault, "every mode of thinking involves implicit rules (maybe not even formulable by those following them) that materially restrict the range of thought."[2] Archaeology leads to the removal of the subject as fundamentally important for the history of ideas. The individual is not as important as the climate that made him/her visible. As Gary Gutting states, archaeology is not so much "interested in, say Hume or Darwin as in what made Hume or Darwin possible."[3]

From the archaeological writings of the 1960s, Foucault turns to what he calls 'genealogy' in the 1970s. It is, in a sense, a shift from exploring the climate that produces us to understanding how we are produced by the climate. In *Discipline and Punish*, for example, Foucault examines the historical conceptualization of the soul, body, and subject as they are formed within structures of power such as prisons, schools, and hospitals. Through techniques like timetables, due dates, regulations, and examinations, the individual is now constructed. As Foucault states, "Discipline 'makes' individuals; it is the specific technique of a power that regards individuals both as objects and as instruments of its exercise."[4] For Foucault, "power operates not through physical force or representation by law, but through the hegemony of norms, political technologies, and the shaping of the body and soul."[5] Disciplinary techniques and surveillance methods extend throughout society to form gigantic 'carceral archipelago'.

Within this context, the individual becomes a subject and an object of knowledge. S/he becomes the object of someone else, where they are subjected to the power/knowledge dynamic. For Foucault, there is no relationship in the contemporary world, which is not a power relation of some kind. Individuals are "caught within a complex grid of disciplinary, normalizing, panoptic powers that survey, judge, measure, and correct their every move."[6] Within disciplinary systems, the body becomes an object upon which power is exercised. "A body is

docile that may be subjected, used, transformed and improved."[7] The body, then, becomes the stage where a constant spotlight is present.

The next major shift in Foucault's thinking is how the individual subject places him/herself within disciplinary structures and acts upon him/herself. The shift to the 'technologies of the self' starts to deal with "a problematic of the creative subject, which was previously rejected as a humanist fiction…Foucault's concern is still a history of the organization of knowledge and subjectivity, but now the emphasis is on the knowledge relation a self has with itself."[8] Technologies of the self, for Foucault, are practices which "permit individuals to effect by their own means or with the help of other a certain number of operations on their own bodies and souls, thoughts, conduct, and way of being, so as to transform themselves in order to attain a certain state of happiness, purity, wisdom, perfection, or immortality."[9] Foucault's previous understanding of domination no longer applies; discipline is now constructed through self-agency. The individual, to be sure, is still securely within power relations but Foucault begins to explore how the individual defines him/herself within such a power structure. Let us now explore how Foucault's notions of disciplinary regimes and technologies of the self together help to shed light on Mary's relationship with God in *The Nativity Story*.

The Nativity Story

The first glimpse we get of Mary in the film is when she is spreading seeds on the land and she and her friends get into a playful seed throwing match with some local boys. Her mother catches her in the act and tells her to come indoors. As she walks by Joseph, her future husband, he watches her closely. Mary comes from a poor family and tax collectors are their greatest nightmare. When the taxes are not paid in full, Mary's father watches another man's daughter taken away so that she may work to pay off the man's debt. Mary is hidden for the time being. Mary's father is also unable to pay all of the taxes and his animal is taken from him.

Joseph in an act of goodwill buys back the animal in secret and presents it to Mary. This romantic gesture is, of course, not in the biblical text. Joseph is presented as a meek man in the film; Mary is much more confident. Although she is self-assured, she still has very little say over the direction of her life. She has very few lines in the film until the virgin conception. Mary arrives home one day and is met by her father and Joseph. Her father tells her, "Mary, you know Joseph, you will be his wife." "You will consider him your husband now in all manner, except that which leads to family. On that, you must wait." She asks her mother, "Why do they force me to marry a man I hardly know? A man I cannot love." She is confused about the customs she must follow and the traditions into which she was born.

It is while taking a break from her work under a tree that she senses a presence. The wind blows stronger and the angel Gabriel appears before her and

says, "The Lord is with you, do not be afraid, Mary, for you have found favor with God. Come, you will conceive in your womb and give birth to a son and you will call his name Jesus." As in the biblical text, she responds, "How can this be, since I've been with no man?" "The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you and the holy offspring shall be called the Son of God." Mary is not afraid; she is curious and intrigued. She kneels before the angel and says: "Let it be done to me according to your word." This statement, known as the fiat, changes many things about Mary: she becomes more confident and willfully accepts a new role in history. With the fiat, Mary enters into a disciplinary structure where more is expected of her and where God, presumably, is always watching. Also with the fiat, Jesus becomes technology, a tool used by Mary in order to transform her life.

Mary leaves to visit Elizabeth and when she returns to Joseph, a child runs up to Mary and rubs her protruding stomach. Joseph and her father are mortified. Mary tells Joseph and her parents that an angel told her that she would bear the Son of God. They, however, do not believe her. Her mother is afraid that Mary will be stoned in the streets for her actions. She tells her parents, "Mother, father, I have broken no vow…I have told the truth, whether you believe is your choice, not mine." Joseph asks her, "How am I to answer this? If I claim this child as mine, I would be lying. If I say this child is not mine, they will ask what I want to do…and

if I accuse you…" Mary responds, "There is a will for this child greater than my fear of what they may do." It is through such statements of faith that Mary solidifies the disciplinary relationship with God.

An important aspect of disciplinary power is that it is invisible. The invisibility of such power is closely linked to the notions of 'hierarchical observation', 'normalizing judgement' and 'examination'. Hierarchical observation highlights the fact that individuals can be controlled if they believe that they are being watched. They will, of their own accord, alter their behaviour in accordance with what is expected of them. Normalizing judgement is also pervasive under a system of disciplinary control. Individuals are judged not according to whether their actions are right or wrong but are ranked according to how they compare to other individuals. Hierarchical observation and normalizing judgement are combined in the 'examination', which is the primary tool used to reinforce the former and achieve the latter.

Thus, disciplinary power does not have to be visible because it is the subject who must step forward to be judged and examined. And in their stepping forward, they acknowledge and reinforce the disciplinary system. As Foucault states, "In discipline, it is the subjects who have to be seen. Their visibility assures the hold of the power that is exercised over them."[10] Thus, as noted above, Mary makes various faith-statements in order that she passes her examination. She steps forward, with

her head held high, and states that society's judgments are irrelevant in this situation. Their stares and finger pointing will not cause her to betray the favor of God. The invisible disciplinary power of God is reinforced as Mary steps forward into the spotlight to declare her faith and trust in the benevolence of such a power. The disciplinary structure is ultimately generous because along with expectations came a technology by which Mary can subsequently achieve a future of historical significance. This technology is, of course, the baby Jesus.

For Foucault, the ideal and most effective example of a disciplinary system is Jeremy Bentham's Panopticon, which is a prison building where all inmates could be observed at all times without them knowing when (or even if) they were being watched. From the moment Mary states, "Let it be done according to your word", she enters into a panoptic relationship of discipline and self-surveillance of her own agency. The major effect of the panopticon, according to Foucault is "to induce in the inmate a state of conscious and permanent visibility that assures the automatic functioning of power. So to arrange things that the surveillance is permanent in its effects, even if it is discontinuous in its action; that the perfection of power should tend to render its actual exercise unnecessary…"[11]

Therefore, much of what makes the panopticon function is the agency of the individual being watched. The individual, who believes that s/he could be being watched at all times, consciously alters behaviour in the face of such surveillance.

As Foucault states, "He who is subjected to a field of visibility, and who knows it, assumes responsibility for the constraints of power; he makes them play spontaneously upon himself; he inscribes in himself the power relation in which he simultaneously plays both roles; he becomes the principle of his own subjection."[12]

Mary knows she has entered God's field of visibility with the fiat and attempts to ensure God that she is faithful. No amount of social stigma will lead her to betray the fact that she has "found favor with God." Through an acceptance of the disciplinary structure she has entered, Mary employs Jesus as technology for self-fulfillment. As she gives birth in Bethlehem, the star shines on the manger as the baby Jesus enters the world. Joseph asks her if she is well. Mary states, "I have been given the strength I prayed for, strength from God and from you." Through Jesus as technology, she obtains a place of significance. She has been redeemed by God and given a special place in history.

The Nativity Story is fertile ground for further research by feminist, biblical as well as film scholars. It adds much character to the biblical narrative. Foucault has been widely used in feminist writings and film studies and could also be of use in contemporary approaches to scripture. I have argued in this paper that the relationship between Mary and God is one of discipline. Within such a structure, the baby Jesus is given to her as a technique by which she can gain a place of importance. It is through the assurance provided by God that she transforms herself

to experience new levels of "happiness, purity, wisdom, perfection, or immortality."[13] As community members see the star shining on the manger and start to crowd around, Mary presents the child to them, "he is for all mankind." We witness, then, a handing off of technology. Jesus is no longer just Mary's technology of self, but is the technology by which all of humanity can be saved.

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[1] Catherine Hardwicke, (Director). *The Nativity Story*. [Motion Picture]. Italy and Morocco: New Line Cinema, 2006.

[2] Gary Gutting. *Foucault: A Very Short Introduction*. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005): 33

[3] Gutting, 2005: 33.

[4] Michel Foucault. *Discipline and Punish*. Alan Sheridan (Trans). (New York: Vintage Press, 1977): 170.

[5] Steven Best and Douglas Kellner. *Postmodern Theory*. (New York: The Guilford Press, 1991): 49.

[6] Best and Kellner, 1991: 54.

[7] Foucault 1977: 136.

[8] Best and Kellner, 1991: 60.

[9] Michel Foucault. "Technologies of the Self" in Luther Martin, Huck Gutman, Patrick Hutton, eds. *Technologies of the Self: A Seminar With Michel Foucault*. (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1988): 18.

[10] Foucault 1977: 187.

[11] Foucault 1977: 201.

[12] Foucault 1977: 202-203.

[13] Foucault 1988: 18.