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**MICHEL FOUCAULT: HIS VIEWS ON RELIGION IN THE  
CONTEXT OF SUBJECT, KNOWLEDGE/POWER AND POWER**

**MICHEL FOUCAULT: ÖZNE, BİLGİ/GÜÇ VE İKTİDAR  
BAĞLAMINDA DİNE DAİR GÖRÜŞLERİ**

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**Abstract**

This study deals with Michel Foucault's perspective on language, knowledge, power, reason and the institution of "Religion" in the context of his approaches to language, knowledge, power, reason and all these approaches from a sociological point of view in a hermeneutic (hermeneutic) way. Foucault's effort to reveal the organic link between them in the context of the "subject-power" relationship shows that we need to read him with a unique perspective. Foucault, who has not made a systematic explanation of religious practices, draws attention to the fact that the institution of "religion", especially the understanding of Christianity in the western society he is in, is an important force that shapes history. Foucault, who has made in-depth studies on sexuality, states that the concepts related to the Greco-Roman world of sexuality have been negatively altered by Christianity. Along with these, the concept of "body" appears as the phenomenon that will interest us the most. It is necessary to express how important the domination of Foucault's conception of power over the subject and its externalized expression, the body, is. As a social being, human beings have to express themselves on the stage of society with their bodies, which leads us to the concept of "power", which Foucault touches upon extensively. Thus, the concepts of subject, knowledge/power and power will help us to explain the phenomenon of internal and external intervention that the body encounters. In summary, as an attempt to discuss and explain phenomenological approaches ontologically and epistemologically, the study titled "Michel Foucault: His Views on Religion in the Context of Subject, Knowledge/Power and Power" aims to provide a conceptual framework for studies in this field.

**Keywords:** Michel Foucault, Religion, Sociology of Religion

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## Özet

Bu çalışma kapsam olarak Michel Foucault'nun onun dil, bilgi, iktidar, akıl ve bu tüm bu yaklaşımları bağlamında "Din" kurumuna bakış açısını, hermeneutik(yorumsamacı) bir şekilde sosyolojik açıdan konu edinmektedir. Foucault'nun "özne-iktidar" ilişkisi bağlamında aralarındaki organik bağı ortaya koyma çabası onu kendisine has bir perspektifle okumamız gerekliliğini göstermektedir. Dini pratiklerin sistemli bir açıklamasını yapmamış olan Foucault "din" kurumunu özellikle de içerisinde bulunduğu batı toplumundaki hristiyanlık anlayışını, tarihi şekillendiren önemli bir güç olduğuna dikkat çekmektedir. Cinsellik üzerine derinlemesine çalışmalar yapmış olan Foucault, Greko-Romen cinsellik dünyasına ilişkin kavramların hristiyanlık tarafından olumsuz anlamda değişikliğe uğratıldığını ifade etmektedir. Bunlarla birlikte "beden" kavramı bizi en çok ilgilendirecek olgu olarak karşımıza çıkmaktadır. Foucault'daki iktidar anlayışının özne ve onun dışsallaştırılmış bir ifadesi olan beden üzerindeki tahakkümünün ne kadar da önemli olduğunu ifade etmek gerekiyor. Toplumsal bir varlık olarak insan kendisini toplum sahnesinde bedeni ile de ifade etmek zorunda olması bakımından yolumuza Foucault'un fazlasıyla değindiği "iktidar" kavramı çıkmaktadır. Böylelikle özne, bilgi/güç ve iktidar kavramları da bedenin karşılaştığı içsel ve dışsal müdahale olgusunu açıklamamız için kolaylık sağlayacaktır. Özetle fenomenolojik yaklaşımları, ontolojik ve epistemolojik olarak tartışmayı ve açıklamayı amaçlamış bir yazı girişimi olarak "Michel Foucault: Özne, Bilgi/Güç ve İktidar Bağlamında Dine Dair Görüşleri" adlı çalışma ile bu alandaki çalışmalar için kavramsal bir çerçeve çıkarılması amaçlanmıştır.

**Anahtar Kelimeler:** Michel Foucault, Din, Din Sosyolojisi

## INTRODUCTION

Michel Foucault is one of the most prominent figures of French philosophical discourse on issues related to reason, language, knowledge and power (Furseth, 2013: 123). Foucault also emphasized the concept of "discourse" and interpreted this concept through the relationship between knowledge and power. The concept of discourse is only one of the main ideas he developed in his academic career. In reality, Michel Foucault cannot be placed in a particular tradition of philosophy or sociology; he avoided such limitations in his academic life. Rather, Foucault addressed a wide range of topics of interest to the humanities and social sciences, reaching beyond the fields of pleasure and punishment, madness and sexuality, power and death, and deep into the spheres of life that he not only wrote about but also lived personally (Slattery, 2008: 483).

Following Nietzsche, Foucault, instead of analyzing the human being abstractly and theoretically, tries to capture him in his social and historical existence. Foucault's aim, especially in *Words and Things*, is on the one hand to show the foundation of man as a subject and on the other hand to announce that 'man is dead'. In this sense, he 'refuses to start with a theory of the subject; what interests him more is how the subject constitutes itself in one way or another, the subject is not an essence, but a form, ... a form that each time establishes different playful relations with itself' (Marshall, 2001: 83). From a post-metaphysical and post-humanist point of view, Foucault discusses how the human being is constructed, "trying to decentralize the subject by showing that the subject is constituted rather than constitutive consciousness" (Best and Kellner, 1998: 58).

It is useful to emphasize the concept of "knowledge" here. According to Foucault (2014: 212): Knowledge can be called the sum of elements that are necessary for the foundation of a science, even though they are not necessarily constituted in an orderly manner by a discursive practice and are not necessarily obliged to give place to science. Knowledge is something that can be spoken of within a discursive practice that is specialized through it. Knowledge is a space in which concepts emerge, are defined, applied and transformed, in which the subject can take a position to speak of the objects to which it is related in its discourse. In the final analysis, knowledge is defined by the possibilities of use and adaptation indicated by discourse. There is no knowledge without a determined discursive practice, every discursive practice is defined by the knowledge it generates.

For him, knowledge is closely related to the concept of power. Based on the view that knowledge spirals with power, he focuses on what he calls power-knowledge (*pouvoir-savoir*) from a Nietzschean perspective (Merquoir, 1986: 143). For Foucault, knowledge does not necessarily lead to freedom. Rather, he sees knowledge as the basis for instruments of social control. However, the concept of "discourse" also has an important place in expressing his views on madness and medical practices. Because discourse shows the transience and constructability of opinions (Furseth, 2013: 123-124).

For Foucault, this concept is at the heart of his theory of power/power and social structure. For Foucault, power and knowledge are not only closely related. They are inseparable phenomena. Knowledge is not only power/power, but those who hold power also control knowledge as a consequence of it. Power/knowledge is therefore the foundation of modern society. Discourse, on the other hand, is the means by which power is created, discussed, controlled and distributed (Slattery, 2008: 477-481).

### **FOUCAULT AND RELIGION**

As an atheist, Foucault did not present systematic views on religion, but in his eyes, Christianity was seen as an influential force in shaping Western history (Furseth, 2012: 179). We can state that he dealt with religious problems in his works in terms of the role of religious institutions in *The History of Madness* (Foucault, 2006) and the phenomenon of confession in *The History of Sexuality* (Foucault, 2006). He criticized religion in many different ways, especially emphasizing its oppressive nature. The famous "death of God" discourse was also interesting for Foucault (Foucault, 1999).

Often, Foucault's critique of religion presents religion in a negative light. However, Foucault's work also reveals a more positive or ambiguous view of religious discourse. Alongside these, there are also more positive views. This positive side focuses on the capacity of religion to nurture and challenge a critique of the managerial mentality and state control (McCall, 2004: 7-8).

As a matter of fact, in his analysis of the Protestant Reformation and the Iranian Revolution, he states that revolutions can be religious and can form the basis for social change (Furseth, 2012: 181). We can say that Foucault's initial closeness to the Iranian revolution disturbed some people. However, what he sympathizes with is the act of uprising itself. The individual's stance against the authority at the risk of risking his/her life was seen as an irreducible action for Foucault (Gutting, 2010: 53).

To return to the critique of religion. Foucault's critique of religion focuses on the religious authority that demands confession. He explicitly engages in a discussion of Christianity by examining confession and the ethics of the self (Furseth, 2013:125). Foucault has made in-depth studies on sexuality. According to Foucault, sexuality is not given but historically constructed. Early concepts of the Greco-Roman world of sexuality were modified by Christianity with ideas related to 'finitude, fall and the devil' (Furseth, 2012: 180). In the 18th and 19th centuries, the discourse of sexuality was broadly established by the Christian practice of confession and later adopted by secular fields of practice such as medicine, psychiatry and pedagogy (Shuld, 2003:145-148).

In general, reflections on the role of religious movements are important because they influence thinking about the role of religion in society and the relationship between religion and the state. Foucault's skepticism about the various means of governing people can provide insights for the study of religious movements, as it tends to challenge ideas about what are acceptable and unacceptable symbols and expressions. Foucault's analytical tools can be used to study the processes of 'conversion' and 'proselytization' of religious movements where confession is fundamental in influencing human character and acquisition. However, Foucault's approach can also shed light on certain explanatory categories that are embedded in anti-sectarian discourse, such as the medicalization of the problem of 'sect' (Beckford, 2003: 184).

Foucault's work is useful for understanding how religious practices are used to discipline the body and how these practices relate to power (Furseth, 2012: 182). Nevertheless,

Foucault's work is still a useful source of information on religion and power, religion and culture, religion and power, religion and sexuality.

According to Carette (2000), Foucault's critique of religion can be expressed under five factors. First, religion and culture are integrated in his work. Second, he believes that religious discourse is framed and situated in the process of human power/knowledge. Third, discourses on religious beliefs and practices focus on the body. Fourth, religion is a power system. Finally, religion seeks to govern the self.

### **THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN RELIGION AND POWER**

Foucault made a distinction on theories of power. The 'economic' theory is one of them, as in liberalism and Marxism. This theory sees power as something that one can possess or give up like a commodity. There is also a non-economic theory. This theory argues that power is not in fact a derivative of wealth for the reproduction of real relations. In other words, power is seen as a power relationship beyond these. Finally, there is a view that conceives of power as war. To express this, Foucault says that "power is a war waged by other means". More precisely, power is an "undeclared state of war" in a given society (Merquoir, 1986: 146-147).

In general, the relationship between religion and power is the common point of the views of Habermas, Bourdieu and Foucault. The most important concept that establishes this relationship is power/knowledge as we mentioned above. Foucault, who made a criticism based on the point that religious knowledge and practices are bodily, expresses the power of language and religious discourse in the management of people. According to him, control over women's bodies is actually a function of controlling them (Furseth, 2012: 187). He centers these themes of control and domination on the headscarf in Islam.

According to her, the purpose of the headscarf is to discipline the Muslim woman's body. Women who wear the headscarf also reproduce their own domination. She refers to them as "docile bodies" rather than active agents (Furseth, 2012: 187).

In terms of Christianity, this control and domination was constructed through the ritual of "confession". The first important transformation Foucault sees is the change in the Western attitude towards sexuality. Starting from the mid-sixteenth century, Western culture begins to develop new and powerful procedures for internalizing social rules regarding morality and especially sexual behavior. After the Renaissance, however, these post-Renaissance developments replaced the strengthening and consolidation of the medieval institution of confession as the main custom of righteousness. At the beginning of the modern period, the Western man is transformed into a practitioner of the art of treating inner troubles in relation to the flesh and examining sin in the form of intentions. Over time, confession becomes the essence of contemporary life and overrides the general secularization of culture. Western man has become a confessional animal. The crucial point is this: Sexuality becomes the primary subject of a generalized drive for truth about the individual, which is understood to have an almost unlimited latent power for strategies of social power (Merquoir, 1986: 160-161).

### **CONCLUSION**

In conclusion, it can be seen that Foucault's studies on knowledge/power and power emphasized the concept of "discourse". The point to be focused on here will be the following: The subject and the construction of the subject is seen as a form rather than an essence for Foucault. According to him, the subject is not a constitutive consciousness but a "thing" that is being constructed. Foucault has been criticized for decentering the subject in terms of these views. The subject, on the other hand, creates knowledge by using it in a discursive practice. He approaches knowledge, which he expresses as spiraled with the concept of power, from a Nietzschean perspective. In this way, knowledge is seen as the basis of social control tools and therefore constitutes the basis of modern society.

Foucault's views on religion based on this structuralist approach underlie all that has been said. Almost all sources state that he did not put forward a systematic view on religion. However, the basis of his criticism of religion is domination and intervention. Therefore, we can say that he had a mostly negative view. Besides, he also states that religion has an

important role at the point of rebellion and objection. In the final analysis, for Foucault, religion has a negative structure in terms of intervention and domination and a positive structure in terms of revolution.

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