This article critically examines some of the theological and Neo-Orthodox readings of Foucault. An exploration of some key texts reveals limitations in, e.g., Milbank’s account, and is developed further through an examination of Sharon Welch’s discussion of feminist liberation theology. A deeper engagement with Foucault’s work emerges, clarifying issues of power, disclosure, truth and ‘agonism’. The paper proposes that Foucault’s work is not an expression of ‘nihilism’ but rather is important for the self-critique and integrity of theology.

The theological discussion of the work of Michel Foucault, the French philosopher of ‘Power/Knowledge’ who died in 1984, has been diverse. Some have presented a straightforward rejection of Foucault’s main theses — or what they take to be his main theses — in favour of what can appear to be a triumphalism of Christian Doctrine. An impressive example of this response is to be found in John Milbank’s recent attempt, in Theology and Social Theory,¹ to place the so-called ‘nihilism’ and ‘ontological violence’ of Foucault’s perspective as the bad ‘Other’ to a purified Christian identity derived from the biblical tradition ‘without supplementation’.² Against such a view, I want to cast doubt on that way of characterizing Foucault and also to suggest that this purified identity is impossible, indeed something undercut by Milbank’s own positive use of Foucault’s work. This critique is developed further through an examination of Sharon Welch’s discussion of Foucault’s ‘agonism’.³ In the final section I offer an account of some key themes in his work that are of value to theology. In particular I want to defend placing Foucault in a tradition of critical enlightenment thought that values certain central notions of that tradition, including particularly that of truth arrived at in an intersubjective and critical way.

I shall have to assume some basic familiarity with Foucault’s work, to which there are a good number of helpful introductions.⁴ Foucault’s work is difficult to describe in a brief way not least because he altered his perspective so much during his life. Foucault’s work started out from a Heideggerian form of phenomenology, then transformed itself into a form of structuralism which he called ‘archaeology’, which then grew into a deepening interest in the transformations between paradigms operative in forms of knowledge; this last being expressed, especially, through a developing interest in the role of power relations in the
constitution of knowledge ("genealogy"). It is at this point in his career that he shows the greatest interest in Nietzsche. His interest in "power/knowledge" turned towards the micro-structure of power in the construction of the self, which led to the series of writings on sexuality, ethics and the self which he produced in his last years. The theological discussion of Foucault has focused mostly on the period from his interest in power/knowledge through to the end of his life. Some of Foucault's central ideas, relevant to theology, will become a good deal clearer as we proceed.

Milbank, Foucault and 'Ontological Violence'

The predominant image of Foucault in contemporary theology seems to be that of a 'Nietzschean' figure who identified truth, or reason, with power, an image that derives from one particular period of Foucault's life. Before I can consider the further positive appropriation of Foucault's work, the problems with this image need to be clarified. In the 'genealogical' period of Foucault's life, his analyses admittedly do sometimes give the impression that power operates in an all determining and overwhelming way. He uses various images of power, for example, the metaphor of power as a fluid that flows around the social body endlessly reconstituting the way we think about ourselves and the world. Another important metaphor is his analysis of power in military and strategic terms. It is Foucault's certainly awkward military metaphors and the related sense of all-pervading power that suggest that there is a basis for the description of Foucault's philosophy as an 'ontology of violence' and as 'nihilism', this latter term Milbank interprets as asserting an 'identity of reason with power'.

Milbank's argument in *Theology and Social Theory* is well known and there is no space here for rehearsing his arguments. Suffice to say that his discussion of Foucault is part of his analysis of contemporary social thought, during which he attempts to show how the 'ontological violence' of secular social reason stands in opposition to a theologically grounded tradition of social thought, in particular that stemming from Augustine. In conclusion he attempts to reconstruct the latter tradition in the form of a contemporary Augustinianism. My concern here is narrowly focused on his reading of Foucault, though if this reading is inaccurate or partial then it would suggest that some of the oppositions and contrasts central to his argument are problematic. But the development of that theme is not for here.

I should wish to approach Milbank's reading of Foucault on two levels: at the textual level, and at the level of the wider character of Foucault's discussion of truth and knowledge. Approaching Milbank initially on a textual level, Foucault's work does very clearly reject these descriptions. To say that Foucault's work rests on, or argues for, an ontology of violence seems ludicrously contrary to the many times he denied that domination or violence could summarize all