

MARK MURPHY

St. Mary's University

LACAN AS "SPIRITUAL DIRECTOR" – ON THE RELATIONSHIP
BETWEEN PSYCHOANALYSIS AND CHRISTIAN MYSTICISM

INTRODUCTION

Spiritual direction is defined as the help one gives to another in developing one's relationship with the sacred, while the treatment of psychological symptoms is what defines the psychological.¹ One can see the similarities between what we can call the analytic situation and the spiritual director's situation- two people sitting in a room talking about 'serious things' which affect their lives. One can see the similarity between spiritual direction and psychology in their dual focus on spirit and the psyche.

Today these terms are seen as separate, but they have a similar etymological root. The term spirit comes from the from Latin *spiritus* and *spirare* which means 'breath, spirit' while the term psyche comes from Greek *psukhē* which means 'breath, life or soul.' There has been much work in outlining the relationship of psychotherapy to spiritual direction as both practices merge into each other due to their functional similarity.² One can see how the treatment of psychological symptoms becomes a spiritual issue as much as it is a psychological one.³

Most modern spiritual directors will be as familiar with the writings of John of the Cross as they would be with the writings of Carl Jung.⁴ However, Lacanian psychoanalysis is pretty much ignored by the modern discipline of spiritual direction. It is taken for granted that Lacanian theory is more compatible with the more abstract theoretical disciplines rather than those of a practical nature.⁵

¹ William A Barry and William J Connolly, *The Practice of Spiritual Direction*, 2nd ed. (New York: Harper One, 2009).

² Lynette Harborne, *Psychotherapy and Spiritual Direction: Two Languages, One Voice?* (London: Karnac Books, 2012).

³ Israel Galindo, "Spiritual Direction and Pastoral Counseling: Addressing the Needs of the Spirit," *Journal of Pastoral Care & Counseling: Advancing Theory and Professional Practice through Scholarly and Reflective Publications* 51, no. 4 (December 1997): 395-402, <https://doi.org/10.1177/002234099705100403>.

⁴ James Arraj, *St John of the Cross and Dr C.G Jung*, 1st ed. (Chiloquin: Inner Growth books, 1986).

⁵ Amy Hollywood, *Sensible Ecstasy: Mysticism, Sexual Difference, and the Demands of History* (London: University of Chicago Press, 2002); Marcus Pound, *Theology Psychoanalysis and Trauma* (London: SCM Press, 2007).

Furthermore, certain Lacanian analysts bolster this perspective by arguing that Lacanian theory is emphatically not a guide to life and therefore not spiritual in the slightest.⁶ As a result, the majority of practical writings one can find on the dialog between spiritual direction and psychotherapy are dominated by the schools of analytic psychology and psychodynamic therapy.⁷ "Experientialism" has become the locus from which both disciplines function.

In spiritual direction, this has become associated with what is known as the transcendental method associated with Bernard Lonergan.⁸ We can also find something similar in the psychology of William James whose experientialist methodology created a bridge between therapeutic methods and forms of spirituality and spiritual direction.⁹ We further find this drive toward an experientialist understanding of the value of the religious in the psychology of Carl Jung.¹⁰ These perspectives start from the premise that if psychology and spiritual direction are to have any therapeutic value, they must aim toward experiences of wholeness, healing and happiness:

In our culture, people even have become accustomed to hearing the message of the Gospel presented in the language of emotional and psychological healing, recovery, and human wholeness.¹¹

PSYCHOANALYSIS: AGAINST ADAPTATION AND AGAINST EXPERIENTIALISM

However, the primacy of 'experientialism' is a modern phenomenon for both psychology and theology. Indeed, Freud was clear in stating that one cannot promise happiness in psychoanalysis:

Activity in another direction during analytic treatment has already, as you will remember, been a point at issue between us and the Swiss school. We refused most emphatically to turn a patient who puts himself into our hands in search of help into our private property, to decide his fate for him, to force our own ideals upon him, and with the pride of a Creator to form him in our own image and see that it is good. I still adhere to this refusal¹²

Lacanian psychoanalysis, reflecting its Freudian origins, states that psychoanalysis must not focus on the promise of happiness. Lacan writes in Seminar VII:

⁶ Ian Parker, *Lacanian Psychoanalysis: Revolutions in Subjectivity*, ed. Keith Tudor, 1st ed. (New York: Routledge, 2011).

⁷ Galindo, "Spiritual Direction and Pastoral Counseling."

⁸ Barry and Connolly, *The Practice of Spiritual Direction*.

⁹ Raul Moncayo, *The Signifier Pointing at the Moon: Psychoanalysis and Zen Buddhism* (Karnac Books, 2012).

¹⁰ C. G. Jung, *Man and His Symbols* (Random House Publishing Group, 2012).

¹¹ Galindo, "Spiritual Direction and Pastoral Counseling," 395.

¹² Sigmund Freud, "New Introductory Lectures on Psycho-Analysis," in *Freud The Complete Works* (England: PDF, 1937b), 2846.

I have set out to show you this year the distance travelled since Aristotle, say, by choosing among some of the most crucial concepts. I wanted to make you feel the extent to which we approach these things differently, how far we are from any formulation of a discipline of happiness.¹³

Lacanian analysis concerns itself with desire and '*jouissance*- 'objects' which problematize the very idea of enjoyment from the outset.¹⁴ What is more they cannot be understood directly in the locus of 'experience.'¹⁵ Its structuralist axioms preclude any recourse to anything as phenomenological as the "subjective" for its theoretical and practical foundation. Lacan states this in his seminal paper 'The Mirror Stage as Formative of the I Function':

"But were I to build on these subjective data alone[...]my theoretical efforts would remain exposed to the charge of lapsing into the unthinkable, that of an absolute subject. This is why I have sought[...]a *method of symbolic reduction* as my guiding grid."¹⁶

Therefore, any dialogue between spiritual direction and Lacanian psychoanalysis seems prohibited from the outset since its technique explicitly undermines the phenomenological, experientialist methodology that dominates current methods. Moreover, the charge that Lacanians are more interested in analyzing the intricacies of language rather than exploring the significance of 'affects' most likely puts off many of those involved in the discipline of spiritual direction from considering it seriously.¹⁷ Indeed, who would want a spiritual direction that aims at fragmentation, the lack of positive experience along with a tendency to nitpick at linguistic formations?

WAS CHRISTIAN SPIRITUAL DIRECTION ALWAYS CONCERNED WITH POSITIVE EXPERIENTIALISM AND ADAPTATION?

However, this is just one understanding of what we mean by the "spiritual". The term "spiritual" is a relatively modern device within Christianity. In the past, it was inseparable from what we now know as *mystical theology*.¹⁸ However, over time, the term spirituality has come to replace it.¹⁹ What has resulted, is the notion that the spiritual has more to do

¹³ Jacques Lacan, *The Seminars of Jacques Lacan Book VII: The Ethics of Psychoanalysis 1959-1960*, ed. Jacques Alain Miller, 1st ed. (London: Routledge, 2007), 292.

¹⁴ *Jouissance* is a French term which paradoxically means enjoyment in pain and pain in enjoyment. The paradoxical nature of it is redoubled when we further take into account that Lacan argues that we are mostly unaware of this enjoyment in the economy of our psyche.

¹⁵ Jacques Lacan, *Ecrit: The First Complete Edition in English.*, 2nd ed. (New York: W W Norton & Company, Inc., 2006), 652.

¹⁶ Lacan, 79.

¹⁷ Colette Soler, *Lacanian Affects*, 1st ed. (New York: Routledge, 2015).

¹⁸ Mark A McIntosh, *Mystical Theology: The Integrity of Spirituality and Theology (Challenges in Contemporary Theology)*, ed. Lewis Ayers Jones and Gareth, 3rd ed. (London: Wiley-Blackwell, 1998).

¹⁹ Alister E. McGrath, *Christian Spirituality: An Introduction* (John Wiley & Sons, 2013).

with the *experiential* impression made upon the community of individual believers while theology is its intellectual *expression*.²⁰

One can argue that this has resulted in spirituality being intellectually silenced and pushed to the fringes of feeling while its intellectual element is boxed off and understood as operating on an almost different register.²¹ This approach can be seen in the work of Jacques Maritain who argued that Thomas Aquinas was the master of discursive theology while John of the Cross was the master of the incommunicable, 'affective' element behind it.²²

Amy Hollywood has argued that historically there have been two forms of spirituality, one which aims at wholeness and the other at fragmentation.²³ It is fair to say that what has taken place is a reduction of the latter to what can now be considered 'theoretical mysticism,' while the former is now what is considered "spiritual" and the 'object proper' of the discipline of spiritual direction. Hence, we find academic explorations of the kenotic concept of the "dark night of the soul" and its relationship to the will and intellect at an exact theoretical level.

However, at the level of spiritual direction, we find that the Dark Night is merely reduced to psychological categories like "depression"-an obstacle which is placed before us on the way to "emotional wholeness".²⁴ Arguably it also results with the tendency to find many of the modern practical treatises on spiritual direction to have the same formulaic framework as self-help books insofar that happiness is their overarching goal.

Carrette and King have argued that in the 21st century we now see that this drive to experience spiritual happiness everywhere.²⁵ Everything within our neoliberal paradigm is presented as a type of reductive psycho-spiritual direction. In other words, the logic of capital is a logic of spiritual direction insofar that it shapes our desires toward happiness. Every product comes with the promise of a positive spiritual experience which one can integrate into the very fabric of life.

McGowan, following the work of Slavoj Žižek, has argued that there has been a paradigm shift from a society which used to operate on "Duty" to one which now focuses on satisfaction.²⁶ So, whereas in the past, society functioned through a paternal logic of deontological Kantian self-sacrifice, today we see a society where one is commanded to "enjoy."²⁷ This injunction-

²⁰ McIntosh, *Mystical Theology: The Integrity of Spirituality and Theology (Challenges in Contemporary Theology)*.

²¹ McIntosh.

²² Maritain in Bernard McGinn, *Mysticism in the Golden Age of Spain* (The Crossroad Publishing Company, 2017), 317n.

²³ Hollywood, *Sensible Ecstasy: Mysticism, Sexual Difference, and the Demands of History*, 65.

²⁴ Iain Mathews, *The Impact of God*, 1st ed. (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1995).

²⁵ J. Carrette and Richard King, *Selling Spirituality: The Silent Takeover of Religion*, 1 edition (London ; New York: Routledge, 2004).

²⁶ Todd McGowan, *The End of Dissatisfaction? Jacques Lacan and the Emerging Society of Enjoyment*, 1st ed. (New York: State University of New York Press, 2004).

²⁷ McGowan.

to-enjoy- a *demand* for a positive experience, is what binds modern forms of spiritual direction to current therapeutic methods as adaptive technologies-of-the-self-a model which also resonates with current medical models.²⁸ However, this demand for happiness results in anxiety and pain:

Happiness, once an intangible quality of individual temperament, has today emerged as an object of analytic clarity, measurable and actionable as never before[...] Today it is not unrealistic to speak of a "technology of happiness" in human resource management, education, business and executive leadership, in family and marriage therapy, in career coaching, physical fitness, and in all facets of personal and organisational life[...]Happiness is today an asset cultivated by a solitary, Psychologically truncated subject, for whom emotional self-manipulation is a simple technique. Happiness has been rendered a depthless physiological response without moral referent, a biological potential of the individual.²⁹

Reflecting this Ian Parker has suggested that this cultural shift in psychology taking charge of such positive experiences has resulted in their accumulation of what he terms psychotherapeutic capital.³⁰ Parker explains that this transition took place in early modern psychology where therapists believed that they could bypass language and representation to delve directly into the emotional content of the subject.

The psychologist became the provider of positive emotional content while the patient became its passive recipient.³¹ Parker further argues this capitalization of positive pseudo-spiritual experience is one of the underpinning devices driving our modern era. He further claims that as our society drives us further and further into more complex modes of production, this psychological and spiritual complex which deals in providing positive emotional content (what he calls the psy-complex) has been crucial in mapping, tracing and creating the subject who *enjoys* producing and consuming 'happiness.'³²

Therefore, happiness and wholeness- through a numinous "self-knowledge"- is what is offered by the therapist. This is a self-knowledge which is ultimately always adaptive in the end. The late psychotherapist James Hillman writing in the 70s describes the dangers of understanding 'soul work' regarding this drive toward enjoyable experience:

Whenever the importance of experience is determined only by intensity, by absoluteness, by ecstatic Godlikeness or God-nearness and is self-validating, there is a risk of possession by an archetypal person and a manic inflation.³³

²⁸ Parker, *Lacanian Psychoanalysis: Revolutions in Subjectivity*.

²⁹ Sam Binkley, *Happiness as Enterprise*, 1st ed. (New York: State University of New York, Albany, 2014), 12-13.

³⁰ Parker, *Lacanian Psychoanalysis: Revolutions in Subjectivity*.

³¹ Parker.

³² Parker.

³³ James Hillman, *Re-Visioning Psychology* (HarperCollins, 1977), 66.

It is claimed that there may be suffering in an individual's life, yes there may be pain but with the right direction, the right way of listening, with the right prayers along with the right therapy, you can open yourself up to happiness and healing:

[Negative experiences] are evidence of the lower, unactualised rungs of the ladder. Our way shall be around them. Meditate, contemplate, exercise through them and away from them, but do not dwell there for insight. Analysis of them leads downward into fragmentation, into the bits and functions and complexes of partial man and away from wholeness and unity. This denial sees in psychopathological events misplaced energies by which one may be scourged by which ultimately shall be transformed to work for one and toward the One[...]Divinity is up at the peaks, not the swamps of our funk, and not in[...]anxiety[...]³⁴

Hillman sees this perspective as being antithetical to older forms of spiritual direction and forms of spirituality. He could see the gradual transformation of the language of the soul into something which negated some of its most fundamental aspects. It is this drive toward 'positive experientialism' which allows our modern neoliberal society, which has consumption and production at its very heart, to utilize the disciplines of therapy and spiritual direction to create a subject who is shaped by this drive toward experiential enjoyment.

The outlines of this technology-of the-self were detected by Lacan when he stated that 'happiness has become a political matter.'³⁵ This is also reflected in his comment also that the medical apparatus had become involved in the regulation of enjoyment.³⁶ This drive to enjoyment is then fed back into current models of spiritual direction.

THE SIMILARITIES SHARED BETWEEN LACANIAN PSYCHOANALYSIS AND PRE-MODERN CHRISTIAN MYSTICISM

However, there is a long tradition within Christian mysticism and spiritual direction which starts with axioms similar to Lacanian analysis. Even as early as Seminar I he states that everyone has read John of the Cross, but nobody "understands him" and implies that the goal of psychoanalysis is akin to that of the Dark Night of the Soul.³⁷ In seminar XIV he suggests that the Juanist Dark Night is important because it teaches us about the contradictions, messiness, and difficulties that one faces in an analysands discourse. He states that it is this discourse which makes the mystics "less stupid" than philosophers, just as how analysands are less stupid than the analyst.³⁸

³⁴ Hillman, 66.

³⁵ Marc De Kesel, *Eros and Ethics: Reading Jacques Lacan's Seminar VII*, 1st ed. (New York: State University of New York Press, 2009), 292.

³⁶ Rik Loose, *The Subject of Addiction: Psychoanalysis and The Administration of Enjoyment* (Karnac Books, 2002), 2.

³⁷ Jacques Lacan, *The Seminars of Jacques Lacan Book I: Freud's Papers on Technique 1953-1954*, 1st ed. (New York: W.W Norton, 1988), 232-34.

³⁸ Jacques Lacan, *The Logic of Phantasy: Seminar XIV*, trans. Cormac Gallagher (Unpublished, 1966), 195.

In Seminar XIX, he implies that the skill of 'mystical non-knowledge' is the 'skill'³⁹ needed in the work of psychoanalysis.⁴⁰ In seminar XX he goes on to interpret the mystical in term of non-knowledge or what he calls "other jouissance" and not a mere enjoyment which aims at some sort of experientialist "whole."⁴¹ In the same seminar, he states that one should locate his *Ecrit* in the same order of writings as John of the Cross.⁴² While in the *Ecrit* themselves there is a direct reference to the centrality of the practice of spiritual direction where he categorically states that psychoanalysis needs to evolve in the area of spiritual direction as a discipline that psychology has only considered from afar.⁴³

Lacan understood the value of spiritual direction insofar that it was inherently attached to this 'excessive' mystical element as found in the Jaunist concept of the Dark Night of the Soul.⁴⁴ This element challenged many of the "experiential" and "adaptive" foundations which are now universal in the current methods of psycho-spiritual disciplines. I will argue that although Lacan only mentions the discipline of spiritual direction once in his writings, his thoughts on the practice allow us to make sense of why the "mystics" played such an important role within his oeuvre. I will now systematically unpack this quote to explore its implications.

LACAN'S ARGUMENT FOR THE VALUE OF SPIRITUAL DIRECTION FOR FREUDIAN PSYCHOANALYSIS

Lacan states the following about the discipline in Psychoanalysis and its practical focus:

The perplexities of spiritual direction which have been elaborated over the centuries along the path of a demand for truth—a demand linked to no doubt a cruel personification of this Other, but which did a fairly good job of sounding the folds in striving to clear out every other affection from people's loins and hearts. This suffices to force the Psychoanalyst to evolve in a region that academic Psychology has never considered except through a spy-glass.⁴⁵

³⁹ In this seminar Lacan states that scholars are interested in the "non-knowledge" of the mystics because its now chic. This is in reference to the interest people have taken in it due to the work of Bataille. However, he keeps using this term. Knowing Lacan, he is playing on its etymological root which traces its way back to the German from German *Schick* 'skill.'

⁴⁰ Jacques Lacan, *Seminar XIX The Knowledge of the Psychoanalyst 1971-1972 Part 2*, 1st ed. (Unpublished translation by Cormac Gallagher, 1972), 13.

⁴¹ Jacques Lacan, *The Seminars of Jacques Lacan Book XX: On Feminine Sexuality The Limits of Love and Knowledge 1972-1973*, ed. Jacques-Alain Miller, 2nd ed. (New York: W.W Norton & Company, 1999).

⁴² Lacan, 76.

⁴³ Lacan, *Ecrit: The First Complete Edition in English.*, 381.

⁴⁴ St John of the Cross, *The Collected Works of St. John of the Cross* (ICS Publications, 1991), 353-59.

⁴⁵ Lacan, *Ecrit: The First Complete Edition in English.*, 381.

This quote appears in his seminal paper 'Psychoanalysis and its Teaching.' The primary thrust of the paper concerns itself with demonstrating the linguistic nature of psychoanalysis and how its work is fundamentally different from the work of what he called ego-psychology. The fact that he mentions spiritual direction in the context of such a critical text entails that we should not overlook its importance.

WHAT DOES LACAN MEAN WHEN HE SAYS THAT SPIRITUAL DIRECTION IS A DEMAND FOR TRUTH?

Lacan is first clear in stating that spiritual direction was a demand for truth. It is telling that he does not equate it with a demand for knowledge. Truth for Lacan is to be understood as an interruption into one's field of meaning-making, as opposed to being just another object of meaning and knowledge to be located and scrutinized within it. Consequently, Lacan locates knowledge and meaning on what he called the register of the imaginary (the ego). The role of the analyst is to shatter the imaginary illusions which plague desire:

The analyst's art must, on the contrary, involve suspending the subject's certainties until their final mirages have been consumed. And it is in the subject's discourse that their dissolution must be punctuated.⁴⁶

One can suggest here that Lacan understands older forms of spiritual direction not regarding a search for theological certainty, but precisely as a type of interruption to these symbolic and imaginary coordinates. He reflects this elsewhere:

When I speak about mystics, I am speaking simply about the holes that they encounter. I am speaking about the Dark Night, for example, which proves that, as regards what may be unitive in the relations of the creature to anything whatsoever.⁴⁷

One can locate the value of the Dark Night of the Soul for Lacan insofar that his conception of desire is contradictory and difficult rather than "unitive." Desire paradoxically aims at the object of desire and knowledge which causes the subject to face the contradictions and difficulties of its own existence as any such knowledge and subsequent fulfillment is revealed to be impossible. In other words, desire in pre-modern forms of spiritual direction, went beyond the psychologism and experientialism later attributed to it.

WHAT DOES LACAN MEAN WHEN HE SAYS THAT SPIRITUAL DIRECTORS EMBODY THE CRUEL PERSONIFICATION OF THE OTHER?

In the earlier paragraph, Lacan goes on to equate spiritual direction with what he calls a 'cruel personification of the Other.' Here, Lacan could be drawing a parallel between the analyst and the pre-modern spiritual director. In his formulation of what he called the analyst's discourse, the role of the analyst was to take the place of what he called *objet a*.⁴⁸ This entails that

⁴⁶ Lacan, 209.

⁴⁷ Lacan, *The Logic of Phantasy: Seminar XIV*, XVIII 195.

⁴⁸ Jacques Lacan, *The Other Side of Psychoanalysis* (W. W. Norton, Incorporated, 2007).

the analyst plays the role of the object-cause-of-desire within the analysand's psychic economy. This object is that which is unconsciously desired but also unconsciously reviled. Therefore, it is the object of transference *par excellence*. In other words, in the analytic process, the analyst, in the strictest sense, becomes a cruel personification of the Other, so as to reveal the truth of the analysand's desire.

This cruel personification of the Other is also found in much of the work of the work of the earliest spiritual directors; the desert fathers and mothers. Ward explains that during the fourth century with Christianity becoming the religion of the Roman Empire through Constantine, the eschatological dimension Christians found themselves living had ebbed away only to reveal a life which was alienating in another way.⁴⁹ The pushing of the early believer, to the cusp of society upon which she stood to wait for the inevitable promise set down in scripture, was now being pulled back into a reality that held no conflict between the world they lived in and the world to come.⁵⁰

Thus, believers felt that their faith was polarised between the promise of the New Jerusalem and a state accepted Christianity which annulled that promise. This angst of being-in-the-world affected them in such a manner that they felt a call to retreat to desolate places, places which harked back to the earlier interpretation of the world as a 'way'.⁵¹ They were, in essence, 'returning' to what they believed was the authentic message of Christianity. They captured this pure desire in their bodies via direct engagement with desolation in order to transform it. The desolate landscapes of places such as Palestine, Arabia and especially Egypt became destinations in which the ascetic came to consider their relationship to the divine.⁵² These desert dwelling spiritual directors were then sought out by other believers.⁵³

To seek out a spiritual director was to seek out someone who also embodied this cruel landscape, someone who had internalized it and transformed it. One can detect that there was repetition and transformation of the incarnational logic of suffering, death and resurrection. It is, therefore, no accident that Lacan has also implied that the work of the analyst is much like the spiritual director in the desert insofar that they also embody the horror of the real⁵⁴ along with later saying that the analyst literally embodies death:

This means that the analyst concretely intervenes in the dialectic of analysis by playing dead...either by his silence where he is the Other with a capital O, or by cancelling out his own resistance where he is the other with a lowercase

⁴⁹ Benedicta Ward, *The Desert Fathers: Sayings of the Early Christian Monks* (Penguin UK, 2003), 9.

⁵⁰ Andrew Louth, *The Wilderness of God* (Darton Longman & Todd, 2003), 54-55.

⁵¹ Ward, *The Desert Fathers*.

⁵² Thomas Merton, *The Wisdom of the Desert*, 1st ed. (New York: Sheldon Press, 1960), 3.

⁵³ Thomas Merton, *Thomas Merton - Spiritual Direction and Meditation* (Read Books Ltd, 2013).

⁵⁴ Paul Roazen, *The Trauma of Freud: Controversies in Psychoanalysis* (Transaction Publishers, 2001), 328.

o. In both cases, and via symbolic and imaginary effects, respectively, he makes death present⁵⁵

However, we can also understand this reference to the desert to encapsulate not just the personage of the analyst but also the inherent logic of their discourse as Richard Boothby notes:

Genuine discourse includes an openness to getting lost or waylaid. This essential waywardness of the signifier, linked to what Lacan calls "the incessant sliding of the signifier," binds the functions of speech to the experience of death. Carried along by the stream of signifiers, the speaking subject can at any moment be delivered over the falls. Entrance into the signifying chain replays the essential paradox of the encounter with death: the only certainty is the presence of uncertainty"⁵⁶

Similarly, the pre-modern spiritual director who wandered the desert was one who came to terms with the radical indeterminacy of their abode. What we have here is a "non-spiritual, non-direction."⁵⁷ It is a method of disorientation rather than orientation. This sense of disorientation can be found in the Juanist diagram of the Ascent of Mount Carmel.

John of the Cross also unfurled upon Mount Carmel the "ascent" of his discourse and he has drawn the map of this Dantean heaven in the form of a fantastic body, the lungs of which chant (like biblical verses) "neither this nor that" a body divided by the central ravine in which the "nada" ("nothing, nothing, nothing, nothing") is repeated, its base covered with a vegetation of writings that become more rarefied as they go up.⁵⁸

In the truest sense of the term John dis-orientates us, he shows us that the Way to Mount Carmel is ultimately a way which throws us off the path by which we usually orientate ourselves.⁵⁹ Even at the level of just glancing at his sketch one is ultimately left with a sense of disorientation at its strange complexity. One cannot separate the spiritual direction of this topography of anxiety and disorientation. To forget or ignore this was to become swallowed up by desolation.⁶⁰

⁵⁵ Lacan, *Ecrit: The First Complete Edition in English.*, 357.

⁵⁶ Richard Boothby, *Freud as Philosopher: Metapsychology After Lacan* (Routledge, 2015), 157.

⁵⁷ Margaret Guenther, *Holy Listening: The Art of Spiritual Direction* (Rowman & Littlefield, 1992).

⁵⁸ Michel de Certeau, *The Mystic Fable, Volume One: The Sixteenth and Seventeenth Centuries*, trans. Michael B. Smith, New edition edition (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995), 134.

⁵⁹ Cross, *The Collected Works of St. John of the Cross.*

⁶⁰ Brinkman argues that modern spiritual direction and self-help in its drive toward absolute orientation ultimately loses itself. "In an accelerating culture, we are supposed to do more, do it better and do it longer, with scant regard for the content or the meaning of what we are doing. Self-development has become an end in itself. And everything revolves around the self...A vicious circle ensues. We turn inwards to master an uncertain world, which seems less and less certain as we become more and more isolated, finding ourselves with only our self orientation for company" Sven Brinkman, *Stand Firm: Resisting the Self Improvement Craze*, 1st ed. (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2017), 22-23.

The threat of death was always tied up with this landscape and how it could destroy subjectivity at any moment. Similarly, for Lacan, the analyst must never forget that they too are surrounded by the indeterminate desert of the signifier. Like the desert, language presents us with the false hopes of mirages. They plague us with illusions of determination and wholeness:

Let me simply say that this, in my view, constitutes an objection to any reference to totality in the individual[...]Psychoanalysis is what clearly relegates [this] to the status of mirages.⁶¹

The analyst must resist the urge to turn language into something precise and stable. He must not fill the void of the desert with the false plenum of signified:

If the psychoanalyst is not aware that this is how speech functions, he will experience its call [appel] all the more strongly; and if emptiness is the first thing to make itself heard in analysis, he will feel it in himself, and he will seek a reality beyond speech to fill the emptiness.⁶²

To fill this void with meaning, is in essence, to shut down the operations of desire and to shift the analysis back into the register of the imaginary and therefore close up the unconscious in the false certainty of the ego.

WHAT DOES LACAN MEAN WHEN HE SAYS THAT SPIRITUAL DIRECTION WAS A METHOD FOR CLEARING OUT THE AFFECTATIONS?

Turning back to the earlier paragraph, Lacan states that these early spiritual directors did a good job of clearing out 'affectations'. This is striking as when we think of modern spiritual directors today, we usually think of the practice as being focused directly on feelings and affectations. However, Lacan is saying the absolute opposite! Indeed, in the past, these desert-dwelling spiritual directors were remarkably reticent in the advice they gave. From a modern perspective, this approach would be antithetical to the friendliness and emotional warmth of the contemporary spiritual director. In stark contrast to the discourse of modern practitioners, the language of the early spiritual directors was marked by an austere oracular linguistic tradition. They were rooted in an oral, oracular tradition that valued the concise, the immediate, and the provocative:

The *apothegmata* or "sayings of the Fathers remain as an eloquent witness to the simplicity and depth of this spiritual guidance. Disciples often traveled for miles through the wilderness just to hear a brief word of advice, a "word of salvation" which summed up the judgment and the will of God for them in their actual concrete situation. The impact of these "words" resided not so much in their simple content as in the... action of the Holy Spirit.⁶³

⁶¹ Lacan, *Ecrit: The First Complete Edition in English.*, 242.

⁶² Lacan, 206.

⁶³ Merton, *Thomas Merton - Spiritual Direction and Meditation*, 13.

In contrast to the oracular *apothegmata*, we have what is known as the *logismoi*. The latter means "images with Thoughts."⁶⁴ The *logismoi* plagued the desert fathers during their solitude in the desert. It was the continuous chain of obsessive conscious thought that distracted them from their desire.⁶⁵ Accordingly, these images and thoughts plagued the practitioner, while the *apothegmata* were words which were aphoristic and designed to break the obsessional search for meaning through the *logismoi*. 'Give us a word Father' was the formula used to introduce the *apophthegmata* or sayings of these pre-modern spiritual directors.⁶⁶ Often the response was little more than a single word, a teaching rich in ambiguity and suggestiveness, serving to disturb as frequently to inspire.⁶⁷

It is only by a sparse linguistic intervention which almost "punctuates" the novice's discourse through which the director can realize that the answer to the truth of their desire lies not in some knowledge of the *Abba*. Nor does it lie within some internal emotional object. Rather, it lay in the fragmented connection between their intentions, thoughts, sense of self, and its relationship to an untameable, excessive Grace.⁶⁸ In Seminar XVI Lacan describes the role of Grace⁶⁹ in these terms:

The measure in which Christianity interests us, I mean at the level of theory, can be measured precisely by the role given to Grace. Who does not see that Grace has the closest relationship with the fact that I, starting from theoretical functions that certainly have nothing to do with the effusions of the heart, designate as[...]the Desire of the Other.⁷⁰

One can automatically detect a similarity in Lacanian Psychoanalysis with its practice of oracular statements in the course of analysis.⁷¹ The whole practice centered on creating ambiguity in language to allow space for the Other (the unconscious) to appear as the third term which mediates the intrasubjective relationship between analysts and analysand. It is important to note that he explicitly states that Grace cannot be reduced merely to 'effusions of the heart.' Grace is not on the side of the imaginary in terms of phallic

⁶⁴ Grace Brooks, "Five Orthodox Words I Wish Everyone Knew," *Orthodox Christian Network* (blog), September 7, 2014, <http://myocn.net/five-orthodox-words-wish-everyone-knew/>.

⁶⁵ *The Book of the Elders: Sayings of the Desert Fathers: The Systematic Collection* (Liturgical Press, 2012), 60.

⁶⁶ Belden C. Lane, *The Solace of Fierce Landscapes: Exploring Desert and Mountain Spirituality*. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998).

⁶⁷ Lane, 167.

⁶⁸ *The Book of the Elders*, 138–39.

⁶⁹ For an excellent exposition on the significance of Grace in Lacan's work see: Creston Davis, Marcus Pound, and Clayton Crockett, eds., *Theology after Lacan: The Passion for the Real* (James Clarke & Co, 2015).

⁷⁰ Jacques Lacan, *The Seminars of Jacques Lacan XVI*, ed. Cormac Gallagher (Dublin: Lacan in Ireland, 1969), VIII,1.

⁷¹ Dany Nobus, *Jacques Lacan and the Freudian Practice of Psychoanalysis*, 1st ed. (London: Brunner-Routledge, 2000).

jouissance.⁷² Instead, it is associated with the question posed to us by the Other in the form of the symbolic.⁷³ Grace, therefore, concerns the silent judgment at the end of time (the supreme other) and our inability to fundamentally answer in response to the judgment of the Other in the here and now therefore associated with "non-knowledge."

WHAT DOES LACAN MEAN BY SAYING THAT PSYCHOLOGY PREVIOUSLY ONLY APPROACHED SPIRITUAL DIRECTION THROUGH A SPYGLASS?

Returning to the paragraph above, we can see that Lacan states that this forces psychoanalysis to evolve in a region which academic psychology has hitherto explored only with a spyglass. This last reference to spy glass is telling. In this sentence, Lacan opposes psychoanalysis to academic psychology. However, in his native French he does not say spyglass, he says 'lorgnette' which is a feminine noun and means 'opera glasses.'

*"Et ceci suffit à faire évoluer le psychanalyste dans une région que la psychologie de faculté n'a jamais considérée qu'à la lorgnette"*⁷⁴

This is extremely suggestive as it implies that psychology approaches spiritual direction in much the same way as one views an opera singer. Here it is possible that Lacan is making a veiled comment on the masculine-feminine dichotomy that operates within psychology and its voyeuristic approach to what it considers the spiritual. According to Lacanian philosopher Renata Salecl, the opera singer is one who is expected to deliver the sublime object of phallic satisfaction, her voice, as detached from her body. As the singer's voice reaches its pinnacle, her voice embodies the 'Holy' for the masculine listener.

Moreover, if this process fails, the woman is reviled for not delivering this pure object of total enjoyment.⁷⁵ One can see this interpretation can be applied to the 'psychologization of religion' we see during the 19th century. During this time there was a transition whereby the spiritual or mystical was taken up into the hands of psychology with William James demonstrating that spiritual experience, as a psychological phenomenon, was the true core of all religious institutions.⁷⁶

William James psychologization of 'experience' entails that liturgy, dogma, symbols, and rules are understood as being a mere arbitrary secondary

⁷² Lacan, *The Seminars of Jacques Lacan Book XX: On Feminine Sexuality The Limits of Love and Knowledge 1972-1973*.

⁷³ Dylan Evans, *An Introductory Dictionary of Lacanian Psychoanalysis*, 2nd ed. (East Sussex: Routledge, 1996).

⁷⁴ Jacques Lacan, *Écrit* (Paris: Éditions Du Seuil, 1966), 456.

⁷⁵ Renata Salecl, "The Silence of Feminine Jouissance," in *Sic 2: Cogito and the Unconscious*, 1st ed. (North Carolina: Duke University Press, 1998), 175-96.

⁷⁶ William James, *The Varieties of Religious Experience: A Study in Human Nature*. (London: Longmans, Green and Co, 1902).

element.⁷⁷ As stated this is perspective shared by Carl Jung.⁷⁸ The pure object of "experience" is extracted from the body of the institutions which bore it.⁷⁹ Furthermore, by opposing psychology to psychoanalysis Lacan is articulating that psychoanalysis differs in its relation to this "experience." For Lacan, psychoanalysis should focus on those structures which form an experience rather than the experience themselves:

The straw of words only appears to us as straw insofar as we have separated it from the grain of things, and it was first the straw which bore that grain.⁸⁰

Reflecting this in discussing the place of the 'affect' in psychoanalysis Lacan states the following:

By the same token, it allows us to criticise the ambiguity that always dogs us concerning the notorious opposition between the intellectual and the affective[...]. The affective is not like a special density which would escape an intellectual accounting. It is not to be found in a mythical beyond of the production of the symbol which would precede the discursive formulation.⁸¹

The point here is that one cannot get directly to the 'affect.' According to Lacanian psychoanalyst Bruce Fink, feelings can sometimes mislead us—they lead us down strange paths and sometimes disguise the larger causal structural reality at hand.⁸² In other words, psychoanalysis concerns itself with how the coordinates of our language (what he calls the intellect) shape our emotional dispositions. Lacan understood the unconscious not just as a dark continent of "emotion," "drives" or "archetypes:

These archetypes, these reified symbols which reside in a permanent manner in a basement of the human soul, how are they truer than what is allegedly at the surface? Is what is in the cellar always truer than what is in the attic?⁸³

By introducing this concept, he problematized the split between the affective and the intellect. The dividing line between them is not as robust as one would like to imagine. What Lacan is at pains to articulate is that we should always stay aware of the participatory reality of language and not allow the

⁷⁷ My position on spiritual direction should be contrasted with the work of Raul Moncayo who argues that Lacan is to be based directly in the same category of William James with his focus on the centrality of religious experience. Moncayo utilises James' methodologies to explore 'experiences of the real' which, he argues, lie at the centre of Zen Buddhism. I would argue that to talk about the 'experience of the real' at this level leads to the register of the imaginary. Moncayo, *The Signifier Pointing at the Moon*.

⁷⁸ Jung, *Man and His Symbols*.

⁷⁹ This psychologization of the spiritual is probably referenced by Lacan in the same paragraph as 'the Cancer' which psychoanalysis has taken little responsibility for.

⁸⁰ Lacan, *The Seminars of Jacques Lacan Book VII: The Ethics of Psychoanalysis 1959-1960*, 45.

⁸¹ Lacan, *The Seminars of Jacques Lacan Book I: Freud's Papers on Technique 1953-1954*, 57.

⁸² Bruce Fink, *Against Understanding, Volume 2: Cases and Commentary in a Lacanian Key* (Routledge, 2013).

⁸³ Lacan, *The Seminars of Jacques Lacan Book I: Freud's Papers on Technique 1953-1954*, 267.

operations of the imaginary register fool us into thinking otherwise.⁸⁴ This resonates with his concept of full speech and empty speech.

The transition to full speech is the moment when one realizes in a holistic way that one is always dependent on the Other. The symbolic order determines our 'existence,' but it is at the very moment that one assumes responsibility for it, that one experiences what Lacan calls a "scant freedom":

...in psychoanalytic anamnesis, what is at stake is not reality, but truth, because the effect of full speech is to reorder past contingencies by conferring on them the sense of necessities to come, such as they are constituted by the scant freedom through which the subject makes them present.⁸⁵

Again, Lacanian analysis should always include the third party of the Other which mediates all communication even if this does lead to a tragic realization that the signifier determines our desire. In bringing back together the affect and intellect along with this idea of perennial dependency on the Other, Lacan could be 'repeating' the position of the pre-modern spiritual director who would not have understood the divide between intellect and affect in the way we do today.⁸⁶

Additionally, one can also see that Lacan went to great lengths to defend pre-modern spiritual directors against accusations of experiential Gnosticism. This is directly reflected in Lacan's comments on the "religious experience" of John of the Cross in Seminar III of the Psychoses. He states:

There is poetry whenever writing introduces us to a world other than our own and also makes it become our own, making present a being, a certain fundamental relationship. The poetry makes us unable to doubt the authenticity of St John of the Cross experience[...]Poetry is the creation of a subject adopting a new order of symbolic relations to the world.⁸⁷

⁸⁴ Lacan also suggests that this logic of participation is found in medieval theological formulations: "In the Freudian field, the words notwithstanding, consciousness [ego] is a characteristic that is as obsolete to us in grounding the unconscious [...] (that unconscious dates back to Saint Thomas Aquinas) – as affect is unsuited to play the role of the protopathic subject, since it is a function without a functionary. Starting with Freud, the unconscious becomes a chain of signifiers that repeats and insists somewhere (on another stage or in a different scene, as he wrote), interfering in the cuts offered it by actual discourse and the cogitation it informs" Lacan, *Ecrit: The First Complete Edition in English*, 676. It is possible to suggest that Lacan is alluding to the Old Theological arguments during Aquinas time. Aquinas was arguing against other formulations of Theology and Philosophy which aimed to create strict separations between the created and creature, faith and reason, intellect and affect. Similarly for Lacan the ego only has its existences by participation in the greater linguistic field of the unconscious and it can't just be simply reduced to a mere emotion.

⁸⁵ Lacan, 213.

⁸⁶ For an extended exposition on the integrity on the mutual dependency between spirituality and theology please see McIntosh, *Mystical Theology: The Integrity of Spirituality and Theology (Challenges in Contemporary Theology)*.

⁸⁷ Jacques Lacan, *The Seminars of Jacques Lacan Book III The Psychoses 1955-1956*, ed. Jacques Alain Miller, 1st ed. (London: Routledge, 1993), 78.

Lacan is demonstrating the difference between the famous Freudian Case of Judge Schreber and John of the Cross.⁸⁸ It seems as though Lacan argues that John of the Cross 'experience' is mystical precisely because it reshapes the shared field of linguistic relations which allows one to view the world and others differently.⁸⁹ Indeed, for Lacan, Judge Schreber's religious experiences cannot be said to be mystical because his writings are closed off to the intrasubjective element of the Other. Lacan suggests that all referents in the Judge's writings seem to be an extension of himself which leaves no space for the symbolic.

This theme of the mystical having an intrasubjective element is also found in Lacan's 'mystical seminar' (Encore). He claims that mysticism is not 'everything that isn't politics, it is serious.' What is more this serious business is taught to us by people like John of the Cross.⁹⁰ This reference to serious business is suggestive:

- It inverts Charles Peguy's statement that everything starts in mysticism and ends in politics.⁹¹ The mystical element is, therefore 'serious' precisely because it is already concerned with the world as Other. It is not just an ineffable foundation for politics rather it is an antagonistic mode of speech which constantly 'shakes up' our relations and continuously renews it.
- The term "serious business" resonates that with the Ignatian teaching on spiritual direction that spirituality is serious talk about serious This seriousness always includes a social element. It is not an unreasonable assumption to say that Lacan would have probably been familiar with his work.

One can suggest that Lacan is arguing that most forms of psychology at his time where misinterpreting mystical theology and spiritual direction altogether. They were not taking it seriously as an intrasubjective mode of speech. Lacan reflects this in Seminar XX:

What was attempted at the end of the last century, in Freud's name[...].was to reduce mysticism to questions of cum [pure ecstatic feeling]. If you look closely, that's not it at all[...] All that is produced thanks to the being of signifierness[discourse] one sees "the cross-sightedness" that results[...] we see that that doesn't make two God's (deux dieu), but that it doesn't make just one either⁹²

For Lacan, it was a gross reduction of the value of mystical speech and spiritual direction to merely equate them with affective modes of enjoyment beyond speech. As Alexandre Stevens states, "this Other jouissance[...]is not

⁸⁸ To read more about this fascinating case please see Thomas G. Dalzell, *Freud's Schreber Between Psychiatry and Psychoanalysis: On Subjective Disposition to Psychosis* (Karnac Books, 2011).

⁸⁹ Pound, *Theology Psychoanalysis and Trauma*.

⁹⁰ Lacan, *The Seminars of Jacques Lacan Book XX: On Feminine Sexuality The Limits of Love and Knowledge 1972-1973*, 76. (translation slightly modified for ease of reading).

⁹¹ Charles Péguy, *Temporal and Eternal* (Liberty Fund, 2001).

⁹² Lacan, *The Seminars of Jacques Lacan Book XX: On Feminine Sexuality The Limits of Love and Knowledge 1972-1973*, 77.

corporeal but discursive. It is a jouissance of speech."⁹³ However, Lacan could understand why many psychologists at the time believed this. This is why he says it is almost like there are two Gods.

This is possibly a reference to the God of philosophy and the God of religious experience. However, he is careful to say that this does not make two Gods but it does not make one either. Again, for Lacan, the problem, at its heart, is the split between the intellectual and the 'affective.' When they are brought together, what results is the messy reality of the human condition. One cannot expect any experiential wholeness or perfection as a result. This is one of the implications of his formulation of the absence of a sexual rapport.⁹⁴

For Lacan, these are the very coordinates that lead to the generation of desire. It is part and parcel of the linguistically fragmented nature of the human being which encompasses both the *intellectus* and the *affectus*. Therefore, one can suggest that Lacan believed that psychoanalysis and pre-modern spiritual direction are/were concerned with making people aware of this fragmentary, paradoxical desire. This is why he implies in Seminar XX that his own writings (Ecrit) are in the same order as that of these spiritual directors and mystics.⁹⁵

One can assume that Lacan believed that psychologists and therapists need to approach the spiritual as *praxis and a mode of speech* rather than something to be studied or psychologized (a point later made by his student Michel de Certeau).⁹⁶ The spiritual is not just an endless search for different types of ineffable enjoyable experiences:

In the beginning was the act," is itself reversed in its turn: it was certainly the Word that was [*etait*] in the beginning, and we live in its creation, but it is our mental [*esprit*] action that continues this creation by constantly renewing it.⁹⁷

One can see that the French word for spirit and mind are the same "*esprit*." Changing the coordinates of our desire involves that we understand that our desire, as bound to the signifier as word, is caught up in our mental life as much as our affective life.

CONCLUSION

It is reasonable to assume that Lacan understood the corrective power of these pre-modern spiritual directors to help throw into question the false certainties which he believed plagued modern psychology and theology. In essence, by Lacan aiming to 'repeat Freud,' he was also (to a lesser extent) seeking to repeat the work of pre-modern spiritual direction and mystical

⁹³ Alexandre Stevens, "Love and Sex Beyond Identification," in *The Later Lacan: An Introduction*, ed. Veronique Voruz, 1 edition (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2007), 218.

⁹⁴ Lorenzo Chiesa, *The Not-Two: Logic and God in Lacan*, 1 edition (Cambridge, Massachusetts: The MIT Press, 2016).

⁹⁵ Lacan, *The Seminars of Jacques Lacan Book XX: On Feminine Sexuality The Limits of Love and Knowledge 1972-1973*, 76-77.

⁹⁶ Certeau, *The Mystic Fable, Volume One*.

⁹⁷ Lacan, *Ecrit: The First Complete Edition in English.*, 225.

speech.⁹⁸ Just as the psychological establishment had forgotten the radical message of Freud, they had also ignored the message of pre-modern spiritual directors by extracting their 'object' from its 'body' and the spiritual is reduced to a distant affective object.

In opposition to such a perspective, Lacan understood the spirit as being irreducibly related to our speech. This is reflected in seminar IV where he states that "The Holy Spirit is the entry of the signifier into the world."⁹⁹ This division between the spiritual and the word has extended somewhat to the practice of modern spiritual direction with its clear focus on the experiential drive toward enjoyment. Therefore, through understanding spiritual direction from the position of fragmentation, and uncertainty as opposed to a reductive drive for positive, experiential "wholeness and happiness", one can open up a discursive space whereby it becomes possible to explore those parts of our lives which we usually do not normally associate with being "spiritual."

Therefore, spiritual direction does not always have to direct us to things which are perfect. Moreover, our conception of the spiritual must include the desert of the extra-mundane and the inherent 'woundedness' of language itself.¹⁰⁰ It must include not only the experience of darkness but also the fundamental darkness of experience.¹⁰¹ To be sure, if Lacan is correct in saying that if psychoanalysis is to be psychoanalysis truly, it must be 'forced to evolve in the area of spiritual direction,' then equally the inverse is true.¹⁰²

If one wishes to access modes of spiritual direction which have hitherto been forgotten then spiritual direction should consider evolving in an area which it has only considered from theoretically afar-Clinical Lacanian psychoanalysis. This would allow the discipline to rediscover the aforementioned mystical element in new and practical ways which question and problematize the current focus on "happiness." It would also allow the *psukhē* 'of psychoanalysis and the *spiritus* of spiritual direction to rediscover their etymological root by understanding that their 'breath' leads to the necessary fragmentation and uncertainty of "speech."

⁹⁸ Pound, *Theology Psychoanalysis and Trauma*.

⁹⁹ Jacques Lacan, *The Seminar Of Jacques Lacan Book IV: The Object Relation and Freudian Structures 1956-1957*, ed. Jacques-Alain Miller, trans. L. Roche, 1st ed. (London: Unpublished Manuscript, 1994), 44.

¹⁰⁰ Lane, *The Solace of Fierce Landscapes: Exploring Desert and Mountain Spirituality*.

¹⁰¹ Denys Turner, *The Darkness of God: Negativity in Christian Mysticism.*, 1st ed. (Cambridge: University Press, 1995).

¹⁰² Lacan, *Ecrit: The First Complete Edition in English.*, 381.