

INTERROGATING THE TRADITION

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IN THIS ARTICLE I want to ask: what light is thrown by the christian tradition of spiritual theology, out of which the ministry of spiritual direction arose, upon the contemporary practice of this ministry? This will involve, first, a consideration of the growth and changing face of contemporary practice; and, secondly, a discussion of the questions which an examination of the tradition must raise for contemporary practice, and also of the questions which are raised by the contemporary scene in its interrogation of the past.

Without doubt, spiritual direction has undergone a significant process of rehabilitation in recent years. Since I wrote my study *Soul friend* in 1977, at a time when there was almost no contemporary material available, there has been a virtual epidemic of writing on the subject, particularly in the United States.¹ Nor is this resurgence of interest confined to those within the catholic traditions. Experience in protestant seminaries in the United States over some ten years has shown that many seminarians, aware of the inadequacies and gaps within their own traditions, have sought help from local Jesuits and Dominicans and, indeed, from anyone who seems to be in touch with an authentic tradition concerning the interior life.

One of the significant aspects of the current quest for guidance is that much of it takes place on the fringes of, or outside of, the institutional Churches. In a study of the drug culture, published fifteen years ago, I drew attention to the growing need for a ministry of spiritual direction which took account of the resurgence of forms of spirituality outside the mainstream Churches.² It is a serious error to assume that the renewed interest in spirituality which developed out of the counter-culture of the late 1960s has withered away and led nowhere. However, as Roszak has pointed out in a study of the spiritual dimensions of the counter-culture: 'Where fertility is not matched by careful cultivation, it yields no livable human habitat, but instead the deadly luxuriance of swamp or jungle'.³

The counter-cultural spiritual movements took place at a time when the institutional Church in many places was at its most 'activist' and least prepared to respond.⁴ However, the year which saw the emergence of the 'hippy' culture in San Francisco (1966) was followed by the explosion of charismatic renewal in Notre Dame, Indiana (1967). The charismatic movement led to a need for guidance which helped to relate that movement to the wider christian spiritual tradition.⁵ And in the years since then we have seen a widespread concern for spiritual guidance in many parts of Christianity and beyond it. In a widely-read study, Henri Nouwen has suggested that there are three requirements for any spiritual journey: a contemplative reading of the Word of God; a silent listening to the voice of God; and a trusting obedience to a spiritual guide.⁶

The renewed interest in spiritual direction in the west was found to be linked with, and confused with, the current interest in pastoral counselling and in various therapeutic disciplines. Pastoral theology within western protestantism had been dominated for several decades by what had become known as 'clinical pastoral care'. During the same period, many Christians had become involved with the analytical psychology of Jung. In particular, the United States, where spiritual direction has become an absorbing concern in recent years, had also been the centre of the clinical pastoral care movement and of the jungian revival. Clearly, there are areas of overlap between these disciplines. But the return of spiritual direction coincided with a developing dissatisfaction with the clinical model of pastoral care. There has been strong criticism of what Lambourne called a 'hang-up theology' and Thornton the 'ambulance syndrome'.⁷ It was the late Robert Lambourne, a priest and physician, who most strongly attacked the approach to pastoral theology which was dominated by psychopathology and by what he termed the 'puzzle-solving view of human progress'.⁸ Thomas Merton seems also to have been unhappy with the american cult of pastoral counselling which he saw as 'the instrument for forming and preserving the mentality of the organization man'.⁹ More recently, Alastair Campbell has criticized the stress on competence, and has argued that:

It is essential for us to get away from the stress on competence which has dominated pastoral care since the emergence of a literature devoted to pastoral counselling. Indeed expertise of any

kind on the part of the provider of pastoral care must be viewed with great caution.¹⁰

Critics of the clinical approach to pastoral theology have pointed to its dominant concern with problem-solving, its narrow range of theological resources, mainly drawn from the liberal protestantism of the 1940s, and its lack of concern with the historic christian theological tradition. Yet few would deny that many of the qualities stressed in the literature of the clinical pastoral care movement would be those emphasized also by the spiritual guides of the classical tradition. Similarly, the revived interest in certain schools of psychotherapy in the questions of ultimate meaning and of spirituality has led many to seek a renewal of the tradition of the cure of souls through the teachings of C. G. Jung, Viktor Frankl, and others. The areas of overlap are evident. From ancient times the spiritual guide has been seen as a *ψυχολογος*. Jung certainly was deeply influenced by christian and non-christian spiritual traditions. While his own theological position placed him on the edge of the christian Church, it is clear that he believed that priests, no less than therapists, would play an important role in developing his teachings. So he expressed the hope that 'a new generation of priests should appear' who would translate the language of the unconscious into that of the christian spiritual tradition.¹¹ Recent writers, such as Morton Kelsey, have attempted to restate the ministry of spiritual direction using the general framework of jungian psychology.¹²

One important contribution of the therapeutic schools has been to stress the crucial role of personal interior struggle in the life and activity of the therapist. Carl Rogers pointed to the inability of training to compensate for this personal interior struggle, while Sheldon Kopp, who has studied various models of spiritual guidance in mysticism, psychotherapy and literature, warns of the ways in which 'training' may actually dis-able the practitioner.¹³ Again, the parallel with the spiritual director is a close one. 'Therapist or Abba, it is only the experience of inner confusion, tension, synthesis and meaning that enables one to be of any service to those seeking guidance'.¹⁴

It should be emphasized that no renewal of spiritual direction in the western Churches can be adequate which does not learn from the insights of the movements of pastoral counselling and of psychotherapy as they have developed over the last century. Nevertheless, it must be recognized that the excessive dependence

of some christian thinkers on these movements has been one facet of a confusion within the Churches about the pastoral identity and a certain breakdown of familiarity with the spiritual tradition itself. There is evidence that this is now changing, and increasingly it is realized that 'the evidence of history challenges those efforts which reduce spiritual direction to a kind of counselling with directors claiming a trained professional authority in matters of prayer and meditation and the stages of spiritual growth'.¹⁵ In a recent major study Thomas Oden has strongly attacked the lack of awareness of the tradition within the discipline of pastoral theology as a whole, and specifically criticized the dominance of the clinical model.¹⁶ Oden's work is one among a number of recent indications of a return to ancient sources, a rediscovery of the wisdom of the past.

Insights from the tradition

What insights can be gained from an examination of the tradition, and how do they illuminate our contemporary practice? Let me draw attention to eight areas where there are valuable lessons to be learned.

1. The tradition lays great stress on the homeliness and deeply human character of the relationship. While it is common today to describe spiritual direction in terms of 'christian friendship', clearly it is a rather unusual form of friendship, which often brings together the most unlikely people. Nevertheless, the relationship is closer to that of friendship than it is to the professional clinical one. The companion is, in origin, one who shares bread, and it is important to recognize the rootedness of spiritual direction in the humble paths of the common life. The person seeking a director will therefore be seeking to find 'a person who knows how to share agony and ecstasy as well as how to take the next step'.¹⁷ More is being sought than expertise.

2. The tradition links, but does not identify, direction with sacramental confession and absolution. The roles of spiritual guide and of confessor are not identical. However, in both east and west, the confessor is seen as one who is concerned not only with the removal of sins, but also with the healing and building up of the soul; while a central aspect of direction is the opening up of the recesses of the soul, which must include the confrontation with sin. As early as Origen, the confessor is described as a *πνευματικός*, and early writers see absolution not simply as the deliverance from

past sins, but as the 'return of the Holy Spirit'.¹⁸ However, writers are aware that, while direction and confession cannot be totally separated, there are some real difficulties in trying to hold them too rigidly together in practice. Thus St Teresa of Avila and St Francis de Sales see confession as part of spiritual direction, as does J. N. Grou. But Grou concedes that few confessors are good directors. In eastern orthodox practice, the confessor and spiritual director are usually the same person, and Orthodoxy also makes a close link between confession and the Eucharist. It is the local pastor, in russian spiritual tradition, who is expected to be confessor to his flock. In seventeenth century Anglicanism, there was opposition to the tendency to tie moral theology too closely to the confessional: the caroline divines pointed to the dangers of legalism, authoritarianism and minimalism.¹⁹

Today, since the *Ordo poenitentiae* of 1974, the whole practice of confession and its relation to direction and the healing of the soul has come under major review. It is certainly the intention that some element of spiritual direction should be restored to the celebration of reconciliation, and such a restoration is very much in the spirit of the tradition, however much it has been lost in the west.

3. The tradition links spiritual direction with the growth of holiness and spiritual discernment more than with training and technique. Discernment, *διάκρισις*, is in many ways the key word in the entire tradition. The early abbas were seen as men of holiness and wisdom before they were seen as spiritual guides; their ministry of guidance was an accidental overflow from a life of holiness and wisdom. In the writings of the desert tradition we find frequent references to the importance of experience and inner struggle: 'the sweat of experience', 'the discernment of experience', 'struggle with the passions', and so on. Callistus II Xanthopulus, Patriarch of Constantinople at the end of the fourteenth century, defined the spiritual guide as one bearing the Spirit within him, and such definitions are common among other writers.

In later western writing, holiness and the practice of prayer are stressed as the necessary basis for direction. Thus Cardinal de Bérulle (1575-1629) wrote that 'the direction of souls . . . is a ministry and exceptional grace of which it is necessary to avail oneself by contemplation and by interior and personal holiness'. However, Jean-Jacques Olier, founder of the Sulpicians, while recognizing that direction without prayer was useless, pointed out

that the grace of direction 'does not flow directly from sanctifying grace' and that 'certain psychological conditions are required which do not flow primarily from personal sanctity'.²⁰ St John of the Cross also insisted that the grace of direction was not given to all,²¹ while Martin Thornton, in a recent study, argues that, because holiness is, of its nature, ascetically narrow, a thorough knowledge of the tradition is more necessary.²²

There is an important truth in Thornton's claim. Holiness and prayerfulness are by themselves an inadequate basis for spiritual direction. There needs also to be a good working knowledge of the tradition, as well as discernment and the awareness of the immense variety of human personalities and human paths to God. Nevertheless, direction apart from growth in holiness and in the life of prayer is dangerous and harmful. We need to learn from the tradition of *θεολογία*, as a way of purification and inner transformation, to be suspicious of the modern cults of training, professionalism and the captivity of 'theology' within the academic community. There are signs that something called 'spiritual direction', neatly packaged and marketed, is now being offered on the american religious market like any other commodity within capitalist society. Against this the tradition must raise an enormous question mark.

4. The tradition locates the work of direction within a social and sacramental framework, as part of the process of building up the body of Christ. Spiritual direction is based on the fundamental christian principle of incarnation. St John of the Cross contrasts the human, incarnational path with that which lays excessive stress on the 'supernatural', warning against the latter. 'One should disbelieve anything coming in a supernatural way, and believe only in the teaching of Christ to man, as I say, and to his ministers who are men'.²³ Barsanuphius places both prayer and 'asking the fathers' in a more or less balanced relationship. 'When something comes to your mind, pray to God three times on the matter, asking him that you may stay on the right road. If your thought remains unchanged, then do as it tells you, for it comes from God and not from you. If you are still not sure, question the fathers'.²⁴

The basic principle here is that of 'manhood into God', of union with God through the human relationship. As Irenaeus reminds his readers, it is not possible for those who have not yet become human to become divine.²⁵ And this human relationship takes place not in isolation from the wider community but within the

context of the common life, social and sacramental.

5. Spiritual direction, within the mainstream christian tradition, has a limited, though important place. 'Frequent conversations do no good', warned St Teresa, and there is little support in the tradition for the excessive reliance on a director, or for the intense specialization among some directors, which we find in some areas today. From the director's point of view, while it is clear that some people are called to exercise this ministry to a very high degree to the exclusion of most other forms of activity, the evidence suggests that they are a small group, and that most spiritual direction is carried on as one fairly small aspect of a christian ministry which is very wide. From the point of view of the person seeking direction, the tradition seems to accord an important but quite humble place to direction. In Jean Leclercq's words, 'it is important to have a spiritual guide, but it is not necessary to make use of him'.²⁶

The limited role of the director is stressed throughout the tradition. The principal guide of souls, says St John of the Cross, is the Holy Spirit; the role of the human director is to dispose the soul.²⁷ The work of direction is seen not primarily in terms of teaching of techniques, but of enabling a person to discover his or her own path. This discovery can only be helped along by respect and flexibility.²⁸ St John of the Cross is highly critical of those 'spiritual blacksmiths' who seek to impose their own path and hammer the soul into their own predetermined shape.²⁹ The caroline moral theologian Jeremy Taylor held a very limited place for the director, for, he suggested, 'men that are wise may guide themselves in all proportions of conscience'.³⁰ The director, according to Augustine Baker, is to be 'God's usher':

... his office is not to teach his own way, nor indeed any determinate way of prayer, but to instruct his disciples how they may themselves find out the way proper for them, by observing themselves what doth good and what causeth harm to their spirits; in a word, that he is only God's usher, and must lead souls in God's way and not his own.³¹

Henri de Tourville (1842-1903) sees the director as a kind of spiritual gardener: 'spiritual directors guide the maturation of our persons as a gardener activates his fruit trees according to the nature of each individual tree'.³² The bad director, according to Tauler, is like a bad hunting dog, which, instead of bringing the

rabbit to its master, eats it.³³

6. While they are not accorded a central place, the tradition does stress the place of techniques and methods of prayer and meditation in the work of direction. Thus the emphasis in the hesychast tradition on the control of breathing, on posture, and on fasting, or, in the monastic life, on the regular recitation of the office, on vocal prayer, and on *lectio divina*. A central part of ignatian direction is concerned with the giving and overseeing of exercises. The didactic role of the spiritual guide is stressed by Jeremy Taylor:

Let every minister teach his people the use, practice, methods and benefits of meditation or mental prayer . . . Let every minister exhort his people to a frequent confession of their sins and a declaration of the state of their souls; to a conversation with their minister in spiritual things, to an enquiry concerning all parts of their duty; for by preaching and catechizing and private intercourse all the needs of souls can best be served; but by preaching alone they cannot.³⁴

An important part of spiritual direction then consists of teaching individuals methods and ascetical techniques which will provide a framework for a developing life of prayer. This is particularly necessary at the present time when, on the one hand, there is a growing concern with ecology and the environment in every other aspect of life, and, on the other hand, much of the wisdom of the past about the need to create a healthy ecology of the spirit has been forgotten.

7. According to the tradition, the purpose of spiritual direction is salvation. 'The fathers say nothing in vain, but everything they utter is for the salvation of the soul'.³⁵ So the director is not merely concerned with helping individuals to avoid sin, or become integrated into society, or attain inner peace, but rather is concerned with contributing to their ultimate glory and fulfilment in the Kingdom of God.

8. Finally, it should be said that most of the spiritual writers in the christian tradition would find themselves baffled by most of the contemporary Church with its managerial and financial priorities, and its lack of attention to theological activity and spirituality. The tradition therefore raises questions not only about the practice of spiritual direction, but about the whole structure of priorities within the Church's life.

Questions for the tradition

Let me, in conclusion, suggest a number of issues and questions which must be posed to the tradition by contemporary experience. First, it is clear that the increased awareness of the political dimensions of spirituality does represent a real maturing of christian consciousness, and one to which the spiritual tradition of the past gave inadequate attention. Today's soul friends, comments Peter Selby, must be also friends of the soul of the world—or its enemies. It is therefore essential for spiritual directors to consider where they stand in relation to the political structures of the world, where they stand in 'the system'. Selby goes on to speak of the 'radicalizing experience of pastoral care' and of the need to see the 'heightening of dissatisfaction' with the present realities of evil in the world as a necessary aim of the pastoral task.³⁶ We need to see how spiritual direction is part of the wider process of 'integral liberation'. In the present climate, as one american school of spirituality puts it, 'we cannot do spiritual direction without a major emphasis on justice issues'.³⁷

Secondly, questions need to be asked about the role of the solitary in the work of spiritual guidance. In the early Church, many spiritual guides were desert solitaries. Today when, in Daniélou's memorable words, 'St Antony is coming back from his desert',³⁸ we may find that many directors will be drawn from the ranks of those in the thick of social and political struggle.

Thirdly, a major issue for the contemporary ministry of spiritual direction concerns the place of doubt. Unlike the past, many of those seeking guidance today are on the margins of the Church. Many of them are deeply troubled with intellectual, moral and spiritual doubts, yet within the overall framework of faith. They need someone 'who is still in touch with the emptiness as well as the glory, the doubt as well as the certainty'.³⁹ If Carolyn Osiek is correct that most spiritual directors tend to be feeling types rather than thinkers, clearly there is a need today for directors who can help those struggling with the dark night of the intellect,⁴⁰ those who realize that to know God is not only to be free to question everything, but to be bound to do so.⁴¹

Fourthly, contemporary insights, particularly those from within feminism, must raise serious questions about the dangers of manipulation and disabling of people by spiritual élites, vanguards, and those with hidden agendas. Sheila Rowbotham defines a vanguard as 'a small band of fanatical know-alls, trotting about,

raising other people up to their level of consciousness, the very notion of which is necessarily élitist and invulnerable'.⁴² She had Leninists in mind, but the words have relevance to religious groups who set themselves up as élites with superior knowledge. If I am correct to see much evidence of a new kind of gnosticism around in the west today, the warning is of special importance.

Fifthly, it is clear that, as the shift away from clericalism increases, and as the role of the laity in spiritual guidance is affirmed, we are seeing more people not only seeking direction from, but also confessing their sins to, their fellow lay people. This must compel catholic Christians to face more seriously than they have the issue of lay absolution. Guidance needs to be given on this which is more than a mere reassertion of the clerical role, and which takes serious account of the facts of lay direction.

Finally, as the constantinian era ends, it is not surprising that the need for spiritual direction has been recovered. Spiritual direction itself grew up as a by-product of desert monasticism, and so today as the era of the 'flight to the desert' gives way to a new era in which Christians are once again in the position of minority groups in non-christian states, there needs to be an interrogation of the tradition in the quest for spiritual resources for this new situation which now confronts us, as well as a courageous awareness that we are part of the tradition and will help to shape its future.

NOTES

¹ See Leech, Kenneth: *Soul friend: a study in spirituality* (London, Sheldon Press, 1977). Among american studies see Culligan, Kevin C.: *Spiritual direction: contemporary readings* (Locust Valley, New York, Living Flame Press, 1983); Dyckman, Katherine Marie: *Inviting the mystic, supporting the prophet: an introduction to spiritual direction* (New York, Paulist Press, 1981); Jones, Alan W.: *Exploring spiritual direction: an essay in christian friendship* (New York, Seabury Press, 1982); May, Gerald G.: *Care of mind, care of spirit* (San Francisco, Harper and Row, 1982); Neufelder, Jerome M. and Coelho, Mary C.: ed. *Writings on spiritual direction by great christian masters* (New York, Seabury Press, 1982); Sommerfeldt, John R. ed.: *Abba: guides to wholeness and holiness, east and west* (Kalamazoo, Cistercian Studies 38, 1982); Sudbrack, Josef: *Spiritual guidance* (New York, Paulist Press, 1984). There are many others: there seems no end of them.

² Leech, Kenneth: *Pastoral care and the drug scene* (London, SPCK, 1970), pp 121-24.

³ Roszak, Theodore: *Unfinished animal* (London, Faber and Faber, 1977), p 31.

⁴ See Leech, Kenneth: *Youthquake: the growth of a counter-culture through two decades* (London, Sheldon Press, 1973).

⁵ Haughey, J. J. ed.: *Theological reflections on the charismatic renewal*, Proceedings of the Chicago Conference October 1-2, 1976. (Ann Arbor, Servant Books, 1978).

⁶ Nouwen, Henri J. M.: *Reaching out*. (New York, Doubleday, 1975), p 96.

- ⁷ Lambourne, R. A.: *Contact* 35 (1971), pp 25-27; Thornton, Martin: *Spiritual direction: a practical introduction* (London, SPCK 1984), pp 9-15.
- ⁸ Lambourne, R. A.: *op. cit.*
- ⁹ Merton, Thomas: *An introduction to christian mysticism*. Lectures given at the Abbey of Gethsemani. MS. 1961. (A copy is in the library of Bede House, Staplehurst, Kent.)
- ¹⁰ Campbell, A. V.: *Rediscovering pastoral care* (London, Darton, Longman and Todd, 1981), p 16.
- ¹¹ Jung, C. G.: *The symbolic life* (London, Guild of Pastoral Psychology, 1939).
- ¹² Kelsey, Morton T.: *Companions on the inner way: the art of spiritual guidance* (New York, Crossroads, 1983).
- ¹³ See Kopp, Sheldon: *If you meet the Buddha on the road, kill him* (Palo Alto, Science and Behaviour Books, 1972) and *Guru: metaphors from a psychotherapist* (Palo Alto, Science and Behaviour Books, 1978).
- ¹⁴ Priestley, Gail Marie: 'Some jungian parallels to the sayings of the desert fathers' *Cistercian studies* 11: 2 (1976), p 106.
- ¹⁵ Neufelder and Coelho, *op. cit.*, p xv.
- ¹⁶ Oden, Thomas C: *Pastoral theology: essentials of ministry* (San Francisco, Harper and Row, 1983).
- ¹⁷ Selby, Peter: *Liberating God: private care and public struggle* (London, SPCK, 1983), pp 3-4.
- ¹⁸ See Origen, *De Oratione* 28; Jerome, *Ep.* 66,2; etc.
- ¹⁹ See Kelly, Kevin: *Conscience: director or guide?: a study of 17th century protestant moral theology* (1967).
- ²⁰ Cited in Neufelder and Coelho, *op. cit.*, p 89.
- ²¹ *Ascent of Mount Carmel* 2,30.
- ²² Thornton, *op. cit.*, p 18.
- ²³ *Ascent of Mount Carmel* 2,22,7.
- ²⁴ Barsanuphius 841.
- ²⁵ *Adv. Haer.* 4,39,2.
- ²⁶ Leclercq, Jean: in *Fairacres chronicle* 12,3 (1979), p 6.
- ²⁷ *Living flame of love* 3,46-7.
- ²⁸ See Libermann, Francis: *Lettres spirituelles* (Paris, Poussielgue, 3 vols, 1888-92).
- ²⁹ *Living flame of love* 3,43,56.
- ³⁰ Taylor, Jeremy: introduction to *Ductor Dubitantium*, cited H. R. McAdoo in Paul Elmen, ed.: *The anglican moral choice* (Wilton, Conn: Morehouse-Barlow, 1983), p 41.
- ³¹ Baker, Augustine: *Holy wisdom* (ed. J. N. Sweeney, London, Burns Oates, 1876) p 85.
- ³² Cited Neufelder and Coelho *op. cit.*, p 30.
- ³³ Cited *ibid.*, p 112.
- ³⁴ Taylor, Jeremy: Episcopal Charge 1661, cited McAdoo *op. cit.*, p 56.
- ³⁵ Barsanuphius, Letter 652.
- ³⁶ Selby, Peter: *op. cit.*, pp 20-1, 8,88.
- ³⁷ Centre for christian spirituality, General Theological Seminary, New York, Requirements of the Practicum in Spiritual Direction. MS. Michaelmas 1984, p 2.
- ³⁸ Daniélou, Jean: *The lord of history* (London, Longmans 1958), pp 77.
- ³⁹ Selby, Peter: *op. cit.*, p 3-4.
- ⁴⁰ Osiek, Carolyn: 'The spiritual direction of "thinking" types', *Review for religious* 44,2 (1985), pp 209-219.
- ⁴¹ Jenkins, D. E.: *The contradiction of christianity* (London, SCM Press, 1976), p 83.
- ⁴² Rowbotham, Sheila: *Dreams and dilemmas: collected writings* (London, Virago, 1983) p 66.