

BOOKSHELF

By DAVID LONSDALE

GUIDE, COMPANION, soul friend, spiritual father or mother, fellow pilgrim, 'God's usher', 'artist of ongoing faith': Christians have always used a variety of analogies, models as we might nowadays call them, to express the process and relationships involved in spiritual direction. These analogies provide an apt starting point for this survey of recent writing on the christian traditions and the current practice of spiritual guidance. Jean Laplace, for example, develops the image of the spiritual father not so much because it resembles physical fatherhood as because he sees it as a participation in the originating parenthood of God. This participation in fatherhood without authoritarianism or paternalism is for Laplace the beginning of a theology of spiritual direction which begins to be trinitarian when it includes an understanding of the presence and action of the Holy Spirit in the direction process. But the spiritual father/mother image is susceptible to varying interpretations and evaluations. Sandra Schneiders, in one of the best available short descriptions of spiritual direction, sees spiritual fatherhood/motherhood as a rarer, more specialized relationship, an unexpected grace rather than a personal initiative, not subject to our wishing and not to be sought: 'an unusually close, usually lifelong relationship . . . characterized by an intense and filial (though not childish) affectivity and unreserved totality of mutual sharing between two persons'.¹ In the monastic tradition, on the other hand, the ideal relationship between monk and abbot, nun and abbess, which involves authority and obedience as well as what is normally understood by spiritual direction, is often expressed in terms of fatherhood/motherhood.²

Schneiders, along with the rest of us, has reservations about the term 'spiritual direction' but stays with it in default of a better. For her 'fraternal spiritual direction' is the usual type:

an adult relationship between two mature Christians, one of whom has a certain competence in regard to the spiritual life which he/she is placing at the service of a brother's or sister's growth in the life of faith.³

The director is like a guide on a mountain climb.

Friendship or companionship, with their associations of openness to another based on trust, truthfulness and loyalty and accompanying another person in pilgrimage, are traditional models of spiritual direction also adopted by some contemporary writers. This image provides the title and main theme for Kenneth Leech's book *Soul friend*. There he gives one of the best available short discussions of the tradition of soul friendship, as well as very illuminating chapters on the recent british religious context in which spiritual direction has developed, patterns and stages of growth in prayer and the process of spiritual direction in relation to counselling and psychotherapy. Friendship is also the basic model for Alan Jones in *Exploring spiritual direction*, though this book contains no profound analysis of christian friendship. While Jean Laplace uses the terms of spiritual fatherhood, he sees this relationship as characterized by affection and love between adults rather than authority and obedience, and he develops an encouraging description of the kind of committed, non-possessive, freedom-giving love that can grow through spiritual guidance. On the other hand, Sandra Schneiders's concept of 'educative spiritual direction', which she sees as appropriate for a time in certain circumstances, especially in the formation of young adults in faith and christian living, has slightly more of the colour of authority and obedience, at least the authority of an elder:

a significant part of the guide's role is the imparting of theological, moral and spiritual information. This type of direction situation is temporary . . . and often involves a very inexperienced directee with a very experienced guide.⁴

On the whole, modern christian writers on spiritual direction eschew the guru-disciple model, largely because, in the popular mind at least, it represents a relationship of continuing dependency. Early dependency, however, can often lead, through skilful direction, to mature freedom in both the eastern guru tradition and in western christian spiritual guidance.⁵

Christian traditions of spiritual direction

Anyone who is looking for a short introductory survey of several different christian traditions of spiritual guidance could not do better than consult chapter two of *Soul friend* by Kenneth Leech. In a short space he surveys accurately the history, beginning with

spiritual direction in the New Testament, then moving on to the desert fathers, the eastern movements including the russian *staretz*, and then medieval western developments from Gregory the Great with some prominence given to the english mystics. In the post-tridentine catholic tradition Leech singles out for special mention Ignatius Loyola (and gets him right!), Augustine Baker, Francis de Sales, Teresa of Avila, John of the Cross, Jean-Paul de Caussade and Père Grou, and has interesting and enlightening comments on many others. He also devotes some pages to spiritual direction within anglicanism up to the present day (including George Herbert, William Law and Jeremy Taylor as well as lesser known figures and Evelyn Underhill in the 1930s), and to evangelical protestant approaches (from Luther to Bonhoeffer via the Quakers and the Wesleys). Such an attempt at much in little space has of course obvious limitations, but it is an excellent map and Michelin guide.

Devoted readers of *The Way* will notice that some of these traditions have also been explored in the regular 'Traditions of spiritual guidance' feature which has been running since January 1984. It has already included essays on the desert fathers (Benedicta Ward), the guru in Hinduism (Michael Barnes), Ignatius Loyola (Philip Sheldrake), soul friendship among the Celts (Diarmuid O'Laoghaire) and carmelite spiritual direction (Michael Brundell). More of these, both christian and non-christian, are in the pipeline.

The continuity of the western monastic tradition of the spiritual father and spiritual mother, developing from the desert fathers to the present day especially among the Cistercians, is admirably summarized and illustrated in *Abba*, a volume of essays subtitled *Guides to wholeness and holiness east and west* (non-christian religions are also included). The essays by André Louf on spiritual fatherhood in the literature of the desert, by Jean Leclercq on spiritual guidance and counselling according to St Bernard and by Thomas X. Davis on the spiritual father in the writings of William of St Thierry are especially notable.

A volume of *Carmelite studies* has been devoted to the meaning of spiritual direction in the carmelite tradition including Teresa of Avila and John of the Cross among others. Here the aspect of Teresa's guidance that Pierluigi Pertusi stresses is her skill in uncovering and helping to guard against the subtle and often unconscious illusions to which her sisters seem to have been prone. Liberation from illusion so as to be free to proceed as God wills is

clearly a dimension of the whole process of direction. In another essay Lucien-Marie Florent shows that for John of the Cross the Holy Spirit is the principal spiritual guide, while the human director's main task is to help to dispose an individual to live by the Spirit and to verify from external signs the leading and interior action of the Spirit. But whether the director actually does this, as Florent's analysis and scholastic philosophy would imply, by the application of unchanging general principles to particular situations is questionable from the viewpoint both of epistemology and of the common experience of spiritual guidance. The short articles on Teresa and John of the Cross in Kevin Culligan's anthology make less claim to erudition but emphasize clearly some of the fundamental requirements for any genuine spiritual direction.

In studies of the ignatian tradition of spiritual guidance there has been a fairly radical shift of emphasis in recent times. For much of the nineteenth century and, with some notable exceptions like George Tyrrell, for the first fifty years of this century, the accepted view of ignatian direction accorded with the more general mistaken supposition that ignatian spirituality is intellectual, rationalistic, anti-mystical and a matter of the disciplined application of rule. This view, represented for example by Roothaan's edition of the *Spiritual Exercises*, was not uncommon even in the 1960s, although Joseph de Guibert's pioneering history of jesuit spirituality (published posthumously in 1953), questions the old view and looks towards the new. There is as yet no modern comprehensive study of ignatian spiritual direction, but countless journal articles on the *Spiritual Exercises* and retreats continue the tradition and explain the practice, while many directors, whether explicitly or not, draw on that tradition by symbiosis.⁶

As for other traditions, *Spiritual direction: contemporary readings* contains short introductory pieces on discernment of spirits in the New Testament, and franciscan models of spiritual direction alongside studies of direction in the writings of Catherine of Siena and Thomas Merton.

The practice of spiritual direction

Authentic spiritual direction is not a matter of the application, least of all the mechanical application, of certain techniques which anyone can learn from a handbook. Besides certain skills, it requires in the director qualities of temperament, knowledge, experience, attitude and sensibility, some of which perhaps cannot

be taught. Some believe that the capacity to be a good spiritual director is fundamentally a gift of the Spirit which can be developed or neglected, but which in the end is either given or not. Nonetheless, people do write guidebooks, and I now propose to take a look at some of their strengths and weaknesses, beginning with what I consider the less helpful.

Sadly, Martin Thornton's *Spiritual direction* is a missed opportunity. It arises out of a training course for spiritual directors which the author was invited to set up by his bishop. Unfortunately, the theology with which he is working and which he commends to directors is largely scholastic in origin and form, with Scaramelli (1688-1752) as the main authority and source for spiritual theology. Thornton recognizes the importance for a spiritual guide of knowledge of the various traditions of spiritual direction, but the method of spiritual direction that he advocates is unsatisfactory. He presents certain categories, as for example speculative/affective, world affirmation/world renunciation, amateur/professional, grim/gay (*sic*) into which the director mentally slots people and then applies the appropriate counsel or doctrine. While it is true that knowledge of personality types can be useful to a director in a limited way, Thornton's categories are clumsy and crude and as a method of direction this misses the point. Spiritual direction is not the adoption and application of doctrines and counsels valid for other times and situations. It has to do with enabling a person to respond in freedom and love to the leading of God in his/her own unique circumstances, and it is difficult to see how Thornton's way comes anywhere near achieving this.

Adrian van Kaam and his school of 'formative spirituality' have been very influential for some time in roman catholic circles in english language countries, especially in the formation of junior religious since Vatican II. Van Kaam is not in favour of individual spiritual direction as a general practice because it is uneconomical in the expenditure of human energy and because of the dangers involved such as dependency. That there are dangers in individual spiritual direction, especially when it is unskilled or untrained, is undeniable. But we do not stop making cars because of the danger of being run over; we train better drivers. Though what he calls 'common direction', one person instructing a group, is his preferred form, still, in *The dynamics of spiritual self-direction*, he devotes many pages to what he calls 'private spiritual direction', not a happy term. There he describes his own approach to spiritual direction,

the process and practice, the relationship and its development as well as the obstacles and difficulties which can occur. All this contains some useful hints and suggestions, but his approach is dominated mainly by psychology.

Van Kaam's way of direction is part of a larger package, with psychological, philosophical and theological viewpoints—in fact a very tidy world-view—which are open to criticism. I am not in a position to evaluate his psychology which is chiefly freudian in origin and vocabulary. But a problem for the reader who is not a psychologist lies precisely there: in this book he makes no attempt to justify his psychological assertions either by empirical evidence of his own or by due acknowledgment of more authoritative sources. Moreover, his underlying theology, a form of mid-twentieth century scholasticism, works with a conception of the distinction and relationship between 'nature' and 'grace' that most modern christian theologians have disavowed since the early work of de Lubac and Karl Rahner pointed out its serious defects.⁷ In particular, van Kaam seems to assume that a state of 'pure nature' actually exists, and that there are two, as it were parallel realms of 'natural' and 'theological' virtues, in such a way that 'natural' faith, hope and love, for example, which a child learns from her/his mother, later have 'infused theological virtues' 'hooked' on to them as a kind of higher superstructure of greater beauty. More recent catholic theology would argue strongly against this kind of division, and, in order to safeguard what is human, see all human nature from the beginning as 'graced nature'.

These questions are important for spiritual direction in that they are not merely academic and speculative but have practical consequences. A director's concept of the human person, of what is meant by grace and of how God actually relates to human reality can make a crucial difference to his/her approach to the task. It seems to me that van Kaam's understanding of nature and grace would lead in practice to a de-valuing of the human, since in his theology this belongs to 'nature' and needs to be transformed by grace. This emphasis on transformation also appears very strongly in what Carolyn Gratton, an associate of Adrian van Kaam, has to say about spiritual direction.

I would like to make two further critical observations about van Kaam's writing. First, in his understanding of the interaction of the psychological and the spiritual in the human person, he puts over-strong emphasis on psychological factors in spiritual direction.

Spiritual ills, often described in terms of popularized psychology, are traced rather too easily to psychological causes and psychological remedies suggested without much supporting evidence. Spiritual direction, as I understand it, concerns the whole person of which the psychological is one dimension among several. Hypothetical psychologizing can become a substitute for real spiritual discernment and hard-headed theology. Finally, though van Kaam often writes of the transforming effects of spiritual direction, this is understood as the transformation of the individual person and there is little sense of the 'prophetic' task of direction, that spiritual guidance is oriented to mission and can be a powerful agent for social change beyond the personal growth of the individual. The transformations indicated would be largely in the direction of the formation of people who are culturally conformist in western society.

Carolyn Gratton's work on spiritual direction is open to the same observations as that of van Kaam. In addition her use of scripture in her book *Guidelines for spiritual direction* is very unsatisfactory in that she takes no account of modern critical approaches to exegesis. She sets out clearly what she sees as the differences in aim and method between spiritual direction and psychological counselling, but when it comes to the practice of spiritual direction she does not move very far beyond a few very basic first steps. An abundance of rhetoric, but the crucial nettle remains ungrasped. Unfortunately, the weaknesses of the van Kaam approach serve rather to reinforce spirituality's already poor reputation for being unscientific, esoteric and theologically out of touch.

For a description of the actual practice of spiritual direction, at least in one of its main forms, the most thorough recent book is that by the Jesuits William Barry and William Connolly. They define spiritual direction as:

help given by one Christian to another which enables that person to pay attention to God's personal communication to him or her, to respond to this personally communicating God, to grow in intimacy with him and live out the consequences of the relationship.⁸

Understood in this way, spiritual direction focuses on a person's experience, and specifically his/her religious experience, in order to observe and interpret it: 'religious experience is to spiritual

direction what foodstuff is to cooking'.⁹ Later chapters explain what the authors mean by religious experience, how a person's relationship with God is mirrored in this experience and why this is central to spiritual direction. They also describe and discuss fully the actual process of spiritual direction with typical case-studies; they show how a director can help a directee to become more contemplative in his/her manner of life and more reflective about his/her own experience; they offer criteria by which the validity of religious experience can be checked in spiritual discernment, and they present a fairly full account of the direction relationship, its developments, its likely disturbances as well as the resistances to spiritual growth that are liable to occur.

While generally recommending this book as a guide for spiritual directors, I would like to offer two qualifying observations about it. First, it is a pity that the authors have not worked out more fully a theology of spiritual direction. They have the beginnings in their treatment of prayer, scripture and religious experience, but it is inchoate only, and a thorough discussion of spiritual direction's underlying theology and of the connections between the practice of spiritual direction and different contemporary theologies is much needed at the present time. Secondly, my own view is that the authors' understanding of religious experience as relevant for spiritual direction, mainly, that is to say, what happens in prayer and especially prayer based on scripture, is unhelpfully narrow. The consequence is that spiritual direction becomes restricted to people who have the time and aptitude for prayer. It also tends towards reinforcing a doubtful distinction between 'religious' and other kinds of experience: if God is truly to be found in all things, then for many people all experience is actually or potentially religious experience. And in spiritual direction what happens in a person's daily experience *outside* prayer is often found to be as significant as what happens *in* prayer.

Though Jean Laplace's book is now twenty years old and its language and theology seem somewhat dated, and though it is addressed, unfashionably now, almost exclusively to priests, still it contains many helpful guidelines. This is particularly true of Laplace's discussion of the nature of the spiritual direction dialogue, the foundations and growth of the relationship between director and directee and the human and religious qualities to be looked for in a director (chapters two and three). He stresses the need for openness to life and to God, for docility to the Holy

Spirit, for peace and for the capacity for non-possessive love in mature relationships.

In another discussion of the spiritual direction process, James Gau explains how the director exercises a function of objectivity for the directee.¹⁰ Among the director's task emphasized by Shaun McCarty are: listening, 'affirmation in giftedness', sometimes confrontation, clarification, help through the desert and discernment.¹¹ For Sandra Schneiders, among the most important qualities for a director to possess are the experience of receiving spiritual direction regularly, the dispositions and skills necessary to foster growth in self and in others and a capacity for reflective analysis of her/his own experience.¹² One of the more unusual features of Alan Jones's book is the chapter on spiritual direction and the imagination. He writes out of a psychological background, with interesting suggestions about the use of images and symbols. And though it is a strange book in some ways (look at what they say about listening), *Inviting the mystic, supporting the prophet* is strong in two particular areas of direction: understanding and facilitating growth in prayer, especially through periods of darkness and dryness; and secondly in stressing the prophetic function for spiritual direction as an agent for social change, a theme which Kenneth Leech also takes up with some eloquence. Finally, Tilden Edwards combines an introduction to spiritual friendship with a survey of some of the resources available to spiritual directors, especially in the United States.

Needs and developments

To sum up: if you are going to buy three books on spiritual direction, buy *Soul friend* for a general introduction to most aspects of the topic and as a basic reference book. Buy the book by Barry and Connolly for a guide to the practice, with the qualifications I mentioned earlier. And buy *Spiritual direction: contemporary readings* for a collection of short, introductory pieces by various authors. In the course of reading for this article, it has become clear to me that we are really only beginning to explore this ministry in its contemporary setting and that many areas need further study. Such for example are: the practice of spiritual direction in its present theological context; further exploration of the nature of religious experience from the direction point of view; investigation of the possibilities for direction of religiously uncommitted people; further understanding of the relationship between the psychological

and the spiritual (have we baptized Jung too soon?). These, as well as more unusual areas, are well worth the time and energy of exploration, so that we might be better equipped to continue and develop this ministry.

NOTES

¹ Of the book edited by Kevin Culligan mentioned in the list below. All books and articles on spiritual direction referred to in these notes are included in this list.

² See Sommerfeldt, *passim*.

³ In Culligan, p 50.

⁴ *Ibid.*, p 49.

⁵ See Michael Barnes's article, 'The guru in Hinduism'.

⁶ See, for instance, articles in *The Way Supplements* listed below.

⁷ See, for example, Henri de Lubac, *The mystery of the supernatural* (London 1967); Karl Rahner, 'Concerning the relationship between nature and grace', *Theological investigations*, vol 1, pp 297-318; 'Some implications of the scholastic concept of uncreated grace', *Ibid.*, pp 319-346; Roger Haight, *The experience and language of grace* (New York, 1979), pp 119-142.

⁸ Barry, William A., and Connolly, William J.: *op. cit.*, p 8.

⁹ *Ibid.*

¹⁰ In Culligan, pp 89-97.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, pp 99-115.

¹² *Ibid.*, pp 41-56.