

## Desire in Psychoanalysis and Religion: A Lacanian Approach

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**Abstract:** Is religion the death of desire and desire the death of religion, or is there some desire that is authentically religious? Lacanian psychoanalysis has a strong ethic of desire. By using the Lacanian concept of desire and applying it to Buddhist ideas on desire and Christian ideas on desire as seen in St John of the Cross, this study attempts to show that the concept of desire has a central place in religious discourse.

"The cause of suffering is desire. The way to remove suffering is to remove desire" (A. J. Bahm).<sup>1</sup>

"You must love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your mind.... You must love your neighbour as yourself" (Matthew 22:37).

"Have you acted in conformity with your desire?" (Jacques Lacan).<sup>2</sup>

### INTRODUCTION

In an article on religion and psychoanalysis, David Tracy relates psychoanalysis to two religious rhetorics.<sup>3</sup> He classifies Freud as belonging to the prophetic rhetoric and Lacan as belonging to the mystical rhetoric. He further breaks down the mystical rhetoric and places Lacan, not in the non-presence mystical rhetoric of Buddhism (where he places Derrida), but in the apophatic rhetoric of western mysticism, associating him particularly with the fourteenth century mystic, Meister Eckhart.<sup>4</sup>

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1. A. J. Bahm, *Philosophy of the Buddha* (Fremont, CA: Jain Publishing Company, 1993) 20-21.

2. *The Ethics of Psychoanalysis: 1959-1960: The Seminar of Jacques Lacan* (London: W. W. Norton, 1992) 311.

3. "Mystics, Prophets, Rhetorics: Religion and Psychoanalysis", in F. Meltzer (ed.), *The Trials of Psychoanalysis* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1988) 259-72.

4. "Mystics, Prophets, Rhetorics", 270.

William Richardson, at the end of a paper on psychoanalysis and religion, asks some questions about desire, two of which are of interest to us: first, how are we to give a theological meaning to human desire if it be understood in the Lacanian sense as a lack and as a yearning for a lost object that was never possessed and that can never be found; second, how do we understand the Lacanian maxim, Do not give up on your desire?<sup>5</sup> In this area David Crownfield sees only two positions that one can take: according to the first, desire can lead to God; according to the second, desire is illusional and leads nowhere.<sup>6</sup>

My aim here is to carry on this investigation into the relationship between religion and psychoanalysis. I will do so by looking at the concept of desire, which plays a crucial part in the three traditions of Buddhism, Christianity, and Psychoanalysis. In the past, when studying the phenomenon of religion, psychoanalysis has concentrated on the role of illusion. I suggest that the notion of desire may be a more valuable tool for it to develop and employ in this regard. In contrast to Tracy, who takes Meister Eckhart's negative apophatic rhetoric as exemplifying Lacan's position and downplays the place of the love mystics, I will take the love (desire) ethic of St John of the Cross as a useful counterpart. I will also consider the Buddhist teaching on desire. The Buddhist view appears derogatory to desire and so confirms the impression that religion negates desire.

I hope to show that Crownfield's first position is a possibility: that desire can lead to God – albeit in the end – by surpassing desire. In pursuing this thesis, I hope to contribute towards a theology of desire, or, in Richardson's words, to give a theological meaning to human desire. This is an endeavour near to the heart of Sebastian Moore, who sees desire as central to Christian thinking and practice.<sup>7</sup> Fundamentally, the study addresses the question: Is religion the death of desire or is religion a manifestation of desire?

## 1. DESIRE IN THE THREE DISCOURSES OF PSYCHOANALYSIS, CHRISTIANITY, AND BUDDHISM

### 1.1 Psychoanalysis

Lacan develops his concept of desire in relationship to Freud's concepts of wish (*Wunsch*), libido, eros, thanatos, and drive. For Freud,

5. "'Coufontaine, adsum!' Lacan and Theological Discourse", in J. Smith and S. Handleman (eds.), *Psychoanalysis and Religion* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1990) 60-73; see p. 72.

6. "Extraduction", in E. Wyschograd, D. Crownfield and C. Raschke, *Lacan and Theological Discourse* (New York: State University, 1989) 162.

7. S. Moore, *Let This Mind Be In You: The Quest for Identity through Oedipus to Christ* (London: Darton, Longman and Todd, 1985); see further J. Daurio, "Towards a Theology of Desire: the Existential Hermeneutic", *Downside Review* 106 (1988) 195-232.

embedded in psychic life and manifested in dreams and symptoms are wishes. Underlying his notion of drive is energy or libido, which is Latin for wish or desire. In *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* (1920) Freud makes a connection of libido to eros and relates this concept to that of the Greek philosophers.<sup>8</sup> In his paper "Group Psychology and the Id" (1921) Freud gives the meaning of the word "eros" as being the same as the Greek Platonic notion of eros and also the Christian-Pauline notion of love.<sup>9</sup> It would, then, not be inappropriate to further this comparison, by looking at desire in relationship to religion, as I attempt to do in this study.

For Lacan, biologically, the human being starts out with certain needs satisfied by certain objects. The child soon appears to be asking for the satisfaction of these needs. But Lacan sees such demands as asking for something more: they are demands for recognition or love, although in disguised form. Desire "is neither the appetite for satisfaction, nor the demand for love, but the difference that results from the subtraction of the first from the second".<sup>10</sup>

As well as desire being related to need and demand, it is useful to relate it to Lacan's mirror stage and to the Oedipus complex. Initially the child starts life as unintegrated, fragmented, uncoordinated, fully involved with his/her mother. Around the age of six months – the mirror stage – the child becomes enamoured with his/her own reflection in a mirror (or, its equivalent: his mother's gaze). The infant takes this image, which appears as a compact, total and uniform form, to be something as real as himself.<sup>11</sup> It is that "which organizes and constitutes the subject's vision of the world"<sup>12</sup> and is fundamentally alienating. But the discordance between the experience of fragmentation and disunity, on the one hand, and the seeming unity, on the other, is never completely done away with, although further identifications are made in order to try to close the gap between the two. For Lacan the initial mirror identification and these further identifications constitute the ego. They help form the identity of a person.

Another level of alienation, building on that of the mirror stage, is that of the Oedipus complex, with its concomitant themes of castration and the entry of the individual into the symbolic order, that is, into language. Although the subject is now able to go beyond the narcissistic stage of the imaginary to forge relationships with others, there is still something left out. There is further alienation between the imaginary

8. S. Freud, *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* in *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud* (edited and translated by James Strachey; 24 vols.; London: Hogarth Press, 1953-64) Vol. 18.

9. Freud, *Standard Edition* Vol. 18; see p. 41.

10. J. Lacan, *Écrits: A Selection* (London: Tavistock Publications, 1977) 287.

11. Lacan, *Écrits*, 1-7.

12. B. Benvenuto and R. Kennedy, *The Works of Jacques Lacan: An Introduction* (London: Free Association Press, 1986) 55.

and the symbolic. But one is never completely taken over either by the imaginary identifications or by one's symbolic identity. These identifications may serve to fill the gap, but they never wholly succeed. This is because of desire. While in many cases retrained and structured by the imaginary and symbolic orders, desire is never wholly subjugated to these orders. For Lacan, desire is caught up in a dialectical structure where it is the desire of the Other,<sup>13</sup> meaning a desire to be the object of another and also desire for the Other.

Thus desire is not an individual internal experience but is an experience situated in a context of otherness. But while desire can be said to be the desire of the other, there is such a thing as one's own desire. Desire may never reach the object of its desire,<sup>14</sup> nevertheless Lacan calls on us not to give up on our desire. Without desire we can not become subjects. The psychoanalyst, by not satisfying the demands placed upon himself or herself, and by subverting the various identifications of the analysand, leads the analysand to "the language of his desire".<sup>15</sup> The moral maxim of psychoanalysis is seen in the central question of the analyst: "Have you acted in conformity with your desire?"<sup>16</sup>

## 1.2 Buddhism

In contrast to Lacan's view of desire, as outlined above, we would seem to have in Buddhism precisely the opposite attitude. Desire is to be renounced. The four noble truths forming the foundation of Buddhist belief can be set out as follows:

1. Existence is unhappiness
2. Unhappiness is caused by desire and selfishness
3. Desire and craving can be overcome by
4. Following the eight-fold path.<sup>17</sup>

For the Buddha: "The fire of life must be put out. For everything in the world is on fire with the fire of desire, the fire of hate, and the fire of illusion."<sup>18</sup>

For the Buddhist, there are six main realms of existence into which there is rebirth. All these involve some form of desire. The realm below that of humans involves experiencing "constantly unsatisfied cravings" and being bound "to crave what can not be got".<sup>19</sup> One aspect of

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13. Lacan, *Écrits*, 312.

14. See Crownfield, "Extraduction", 96.

15. Lacan, *Écrits*, 81.

16. Lacan, *Ethics of Psychoanalysis*, 311.

17. See M. Ridley, *The Art of World Religions: Buddhism* (Dorset, UK: Blandford Press, 1978) 19.

18. See I. Singer, *The Nature of Love: Plato to Luther* (New York: University of Chicago Press, 1984) 151.

19. See B. Kantipalo, *Buddhism Explained* (Singapore: Golden Pagoda Buddhist Temple, 1992) 55.

Buddhist practice, which pertains to several of the items of the eight-fold path, is that of meditation. The aim is to obtain a state of "one-pointedness" of mind, where such hindrances as sense, desire, ill-will, sloth, and torpor are overcome, and one reaches various mystical states, the highest and main aim of the practice being the attainment of Nirvana.<sup>20</sup> At this stage, there is no longer any desire. Or is there?

Archie Bahm points out that two terms are used in regard to desire for Buddhists. One is *tanha* and the other is *chanda*. He understands the first as desire for more than can be obtained, and the second as desire for what can be obtained. He then argues that Buddhist teaching only proscribes *tanha*, that which cannot be obtained, and that *chanda* is of value.<sup>21</sup> Bahm further points out that the purpose of the teaching is to help people gain as much satisfaction as possible in life with the least effort.<sup>22</sup>

Most understandings of Buddhism, however, keep to the strong interpretation of desire. Melford Spiro points out that, while in practice many Buddhists have watered down the doctrine of desire to allow for a more satisfactory life, either in this world or the next, the main understanding of desire is orientated towards a total rejection of desire.<sup>23</sup>

So, it seems, there is either a total negative valuation put on desire, or else desire is limited to that which meets needs. Even if the second situation is the case, this understanding related to the meeting of needs does not seem equivalent to "desire" as understood by Lacan.

### 1.3 Christianity

The commandment, "You must love the Lord, your God with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your mind, and you must love your neighbour as yourself" (Matt 22:37-40) might well be taken as something exemplifying Christian teaching. However, the term "love" has been interpreted in at least two ways in the history of Christianity: as eros and as agape.

In a large part of the Christian tradition, love has been interpreted as desire, as seen in Augustine's definition, "Love eager to possess its objective is desire"<sup>24</sup> or as in Hugh of St Victor, "What is love but to desire and to long to have and to possess and to enjoy. If not to possess, then to long to possess; if possessed, then to long to keep."<sup>25</sup> Love is thus related to lack and to longing.

20. P. Harvey, *An Introduction to Buddhism: Teachings, History and Practices* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1990) 249.

21. Bahm, *Philosophy of the Buddha*, 60-69.

22. Bahm, *Philosophy of the Buddha*, 58-59.

23. See M. Spiro, *Buddhism and Society: A Great Tradition and its Burmese Vicissitudes* (London: George Allen and Unwin, 1970) 99.

24. Singer, *Nature of Love*, 165.

25. Singer, *Nature of Love*, 169.

One of the main concerns of Christianity has been the cultivation of this desire – exemplifying the aspiration of the Psalmist as quoted by St John of the Cross: “Even as the hart desires the fountain of the waters, even so does my soul desire thee, O God.”<sup>26</sup> One cultivates this desire through prayer, meditation and ascetic practices. The ultimate aim is union with God. While on one level the cultivation of this desire is conscious, on another level it can be seen as unconscious (as desire always is for Lacan). It involves going to the heart of our being, giving ourselves up to the desire for God which is within us.

Have we got, then, in Christianity, in contrast to Buddhism, a more ostensive valuation of desire, and of the language of desire. “In the beginning was the word” (John 1:1). Is the word going to lead us to desire, as in psychoanalysis?

But Christianity also knows negative restrictions on desire. St Jerome, St Augustine, the Church Fathers in general, have a reputation for negativity towards desire, particularly in the sexual sphere. Clement of Alexandria, speaking of desire, cites the Greek maxim, “to fight desire and not be subservient to it, so as to bring it to practical effect”.<sup>27</sup>

He goes on to say of the Christian attitude: “our ideal is not to experience desire at all”.<sup>28</sup> The psychoanalyst Stuart Schneiderman would agree with this estimate of the Christian view. For him Christianity is a love ethic that in its essence is inimical to desire. It strives for bliss, enjoyment, and satisfaction in a union with God, which comes from a direct, unmediated vision of God. This necessarily involves the obliteration of desire. Schneiderman places desire on the side of masculinity and the phallus, where he also places Plotinus and the Greek/Roman religions. Love, he places on the side of femininity and angelic affect, which is where he places Christianity and Christian mysticism. He maintains: “beings who seek perfection and complete fulfilment in God’s love are not desiring; they are demanding satisfaction” whereas “desire does not seek satisfaction; desire...desires recognition; it desires the Other’s desire”.<sup>29</sup> So, even in Christianity, we may not have a positive valuation of desire.

But is this really the case? To start to show otherwise, I turn to the example of St John of the Cross.

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26. St John of the Cross, *The Living Flame of Love* (London: Burns and Oates, 1977) 70.

27. See T. Mackin, *Marriage in the Catholic Church: What is Marriage?* (New York: Paulist, 1982) 118.

28. Mackin, *Marriage*, 118.

29. S. Schneiderman, *An Angel Passes: How the Sexes Became Undivided* (New York: New York University Press, 1988) 136.

## 2. THE EGO AND THE IMAGINARY

## 2.1 St John of the Cross

St John of the Cross exemplifies, par excellence, the love ethic of Christianity. St John is a master of desire. Like Socrates maintaining that he knew only of eros, John says of himself: "I do one thing only...which is to love".<sup>30</sup> Our question is: Does he *desire*?

In *The Ascent of Mount Carmel* St John speaks of "going forth from all things".<sup>31</sup> He speaks of two "nights", nights of purgation a person must go through on the mystical path. One involves purgation of the sensual part of the soul, the other purgation of the spiritual part of the soul. He speaks of the first of these mortifications as a putting to sleep of the desires,<sup>32</sup> and he gives counsel as to how best to start on this path of conquering desires: rejecting every pleasure to do with sense, unless such pleasure be for the glory of God. Furthermore, speaking about the second night, John says that the same purifications must occur also as far as spiritual delights are concerned. The three faculties of the soul – the understanding, the will, and the memory (he refers to all as "caverns") – must themselves be emptied. He ends both the first two stanzas of his poetry with the phrase, "My house being now at rest", signifying the privation of all pleasures and the mortification of all desires; the desires have now been lulled to sleep.<sup>33</sup>

Seemingly, the above comments pertain to the concept of "desire". I would maintain, however, that what St John is aiming at is not the closing of desire but the opening up of desire. Those things, which close the gap of desire, to all of these, John says No (*nada*). He points the person towards emptiness and detachment. It is here, also, when speaking of the senses and the requirement of purification from reliance on these, that he seems to be referring to what Lacan would call the "imaginary". These purifications aim at reaching beyond the "point at which things begin to fade from sight".<sup>34</sup> In Book 2, Chapter XII, he deals explicitly with what he calls the imagination and fancy "which are forms that are represented to the senses by bodily figures and images".<sup>35</sup> These can form the subject matter of meditation in the early stages, but of them he says: "all these imaginings must be cast out from the soul".<sup>36</sup>

The imaginary, then, is subverted and the identifications built up in this way are also subverted, leaving emptiness. Even the spiritual gifts

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30. Quoted by A. Cugno, *St John of the Cross: The Life and Thought of a Christian Mystic* (Tunbridge Wells: Burns and Oates, 1982) 85.

31. St John of the Cross, *The Ascent of Mount Carmel* (New York: Image Books, 1958) 103.

32. St John of the Cross, *The Ascent of Mount Carmel*, 105.

33. St John of the Cross, *The Ascent of Mount Carmel*, 159.

34. St John of the Cross, *The Ascent of Mount Carmel*, 107.

35. St John of the Cross, *The Ascent of Mount Carmel*, 214.

36. St John of the Cross, *The Ascent of Mount Carmel*, 215.

such as visions and voices (the symbolic) are negated and must also be given up. The self is despised and depreciated; great aridity is experienced. It all amounts to a stripping (*denudere* is John's term) of the person, "a stripping of himself (*sic*) of himself".<sup>37</sup>

There would seem to be, then, in both St John of the Cross and Lacan, a notion of the imaginary construct of the ego which attempts to fill up a lack in being. Both attempt to subvert this imaginary ego. Lacan, in fact, at the end of an analysis calls this process a subjective destitution.

## 2.2 Buddhism

Buddhism has a more explicit theorization of the illusionary nature of the ego than Christianity. For the Buddhist the person is built up of five aggregates: matter (which includes sense organs and mind objects), sensations, perceptions, mental formations (volitional activity) and consciousness. All these are ever-changing states but taken together they make a whole and seem to be permanent. This gives the sense of a coherent entity or ego. But in fact it is an illusion. There is nothing stable or lasting, only a combination of these elements at any one point of time. So long as we accept it as a fixed whole entity, so long will it be the focus of our lives. And so long as this is the case so long will there be desire or craving: "the will to live, to exist, to re-exist, to become more and more, to accumulate more and more".<sup>38</sup>

All of this, for the Buddhist, is *dukkha* or suffering and there is one way out: to overcome the desire that is its cause through following the eight-fold path. In the Fire Sermon, the Buddha speaks of the advanced disciple:

a learned and noble disciple who sees things thus becomes dispassionate with regard to the eye,... with regard to visible forms, ...with regard to the visual consciousness,...with regard to the visual impressions.<sup>39</sup>

With practice one can achieve various mystical states bringing some joy and consolation. But, as with John of the Cross, one can go beyond these.

In its cultivation of "no desire" in this way Buddhism seems to involve what we have already seen in John of the Cross: the imaginary and the ego that is constructed on it. For both Buddhist and Christian these fill up a gap in our being. In both cases the word "desire" seems to be used with reference to a matter of appetite. Satisfaction of needs must not be confused with a something else which does not quell desire. For Lacan, it is out of the lack that desire emerges.

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37. Cugno, *St John of the Cross*, 55.

38. W. Rahula, *What the Buddha Taught* (London: Wisdom Books, 1990) 31.

39. Rahula, *What the Buddha Taught*, 96.

## 3. LACK AND DESIRE

## 3.1 Christianity

In St John of the Cross we see that, while desire as appetite is put in its place, there is another desire that arises. The whole of *The Ascent of Mount Carmel* is embedded in the phrase “kindled in love with yearnings”.<sup>40</sup> The imaginary may be put to sleep and, as with Buddhism, an analogy made with the putting out of a fire. But there is also mention of another fire, a more positive one, captured in the title of the book *The Living Flame of Love*.<sup>41</sup> Even in *The Ascent*, at the beginning, where practice and counsel is given as to how to conquer desire, John starts with a series of exhortations which still name desires:

Desire to have pleasure in nothing  
 Desire to possess nothing  
 Desire to be nothing...  
 Desire to know nothing....<sup>42</sup>

At the end of *The Dark Night* he writes:

yet its (the soul's) love alone, which burns at this time and makes its heart to long for the beloved, is that which now moves and guides it and makes it soar upwards to its God along the road of solitude without its knowing how or in what manner.<sup>43</sup>

Through *The Ascent* and *The Dark Night* and in the beginning of *The Spiritual Canticle*, we see this yearning or desire increasing – increasing all the more as the beloved is absent. With respect to the first “cavern” of the soul (the understanding) John says that “its emptiness is thirst for God”.<sup>44</sup> He speaks similarly of the second and third caverns (the memory and will). A little later he speaks of these caverns being open to an intense desire, which is the preparation for union.<sup>45</sup> Summing up John's notion of the soul Alan Cugno speaks of it as being “defined by its capacity to desire God”.<sup>46</sup>

## 3.2 Buddhism

In Buddhism it is difficult to see the same passionate statement on desire or love as we see in John of the Cross and numerous other Christian mystics. But Buddhist teaching is based on universal love

40. St John of the Cross, *The Ascent of Mount Carmel*, 93.

41. See n. 26 above.

42. St John of the Cross, *The Ascent of Mount Carmel*, 156.

43. St John of the Cross, *The Dark Night of the Soul* in E. Allison Peers (ed.), *The Complete Works of Saint John of the Cross*; 3 Vols. (London: Burns and Oates, 1934-35) 1.485.

44. St John of the Cross, *Living Flame of Love*, 70-71.

45. St John of the Cross, *Living Flame of Love*, 73.

46. Cugno, *St John of the Cross*, 41.

(*metta*) and compassion (*karuna*) for all living things. The Buddha's teaching was said to be "for the good of the many, for the happiness of the many out of compassion for the world".<sup>47</sup> So in Mahayana Buddhism, in contrast to Theravadin Buddhism, there is emphasis on the role of the bodhisattva who renounces enlightenment for the sake of staying in this world to teach others the path to enlightenment.

We see, then, that love and compassion are present in Buddhism. But emptiness and lack are emphasized to a greater degree than in Christianity – as also is the need for the deconstruction of the ego. The presence of lack or voidness suggests that it might be true to speak of desire in the Lacanian sense with respect to Buddhism. To see how this could be so, let us consider the Buddhist notion of Nirvana, in the context of what the three discourses (Christianity, Buddhism and Lacanian Psychoanalysis) are aiming at in their teaching.

#### 4. AIMS OF THE THREE DISCOURSES

Christianity has union with God as its aim, Buddhism has Nirvana, and Psychoanalysis has desire. Are Christian union with God and Buddhist attainment of Nirvana the same thing? Do both serve to fill up the lack in being, and so do away with desire, as Schneiderman would have us believe is the case with Christianity, and, as Freud perhaps also believed to be the case, on the Nirvana principle in Buddhism?<sup>48</sup>

We have already seen with John of the Cross, particularly in *The Ascent* and *The Dark Night*, an emphasis placed on absence and lack, and the outcome of this as a desire for God. But what happens then? The whole process for John is moving towards union with God, and he speaks of this union as involving two phases: spiritual betrothal and spiritual marriage. These are dealt with in his books *The Spiritual Canticle* and *The Living Flame of Love*. The rapture of the spiritual betrothal involves both great joy and great pain.<sup>49</sup> John refers his readers to Teresa of Avila's descriptions of these experiences.<sup>50</sup> He calls the spiritual marriage "that perfect union with God".<sup>51</sup> It is a total transformation in the beloved, where the soul participates in the Divine and an end is brought to "all the operations and passions of the soul".<sup>52</sup>

In Buddhism, the end is Nirvana. Because of its ineffable nature Nirvana is seldom described positively. Rather, it tends more often to be described negatively, as consisting in total non-attachment and the

47. Rahula, *What the Buddha Taught*, 46.

48. J. Laplanche and J. Portalis, *The Language of Psycho-analysis* (London: The Hogarth Press and the Institute of Psycho-analysis, 1985) 272.

49. St John of the Cross, *The Spiritual Canticle and Poems* (Tunbridge Wells: Burns and Oates, 1978) 70.

50. St John of the Cross, *The Spiritual Canticle*, 72.

51. St John of the Cross, *The Spiritual Canticle*, 102.

52. St John of the Cross, *The Spiritual Canticle*, 145.

cessation of desire. It is called the unconditioned or unconstricted. In respect to it an analogy is sometimes made with the extinguishing of a flame. But there is also a concern in Buddhism, that Nirvana not be interpreted as annihilation or complete negation. It cannot be the annihilation of the self because there is no self to annihilate. More positively Nirvana has been called "the marvellous", "the highest bliss".<sup>53</sup>

The end state aspired to in Buddhism seems, then, very similar to that of Christianity. Before relating both directly to the problematic of desire, I propose first to look at the Lacanian notion of "feminine jouissance", sometimes referred to as "the other jouissance".

##### 5. DESIRE AND JOUISSANCE

In Lacan there is a jouissance – an "enjoyment" both painful and pleasurable – that is unspeakable. It is beyond the order of words and beyond phallic masculine desire and satisfaction; it is associated with the feminine.<sup>54</sup> It is beyond knowledge and words. It seems to touch the Real order of existence, beyond both the imaginary and the symbolic. It is a jouissance of love that can "condescend to desire".<sup>55</sup> We have already seen, how for both the Christian mystic and the Buddhist there is something ineffable, involving both great joy and great pain, and depending on the deconstruction of the ego (the imaginary) before it shows itself. For John of the Cross also there is a need to go more "by unknowing than by knowledge".<sup>56</sup> Words are dropped in meditation and the symbolic certainties of life are left behind. Buddhism also in reaching its aim positively values the "I do not know"<sup>57</sup> and "No depending on words".<sup>58</sup>

Thus far, then, the states that Christian and Buddhist mystics seek to obtain seem to be similar to that which Lacan calls "feminine jouissance". Lacan, in fact, points to John of the Cross and especially to Teresa of Avila as exemplifying this state of jouissance.<sup>59</sup>

But here we can ask the question: did Lacan aim to bring the person to desire and to remain there? Or is there something more? And, if so, how are the two related?

In Lacan's thinking at the time of the Ethics Seminar, "desire" seems to be restricted to being desire in the sense of an unceasing, never-

53. Harvey, *Introduction to Buddhism*, 63.

54. J. Mitchell and J. Rose (eds.), *Feminine Sexuality: Jacques Lacan and the École Freudienne* (London: Macmillan, 1982) 145.

55. See B. Fink, *The Lacanian Subject: Between Language and Jouissance* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1995) 120, 196.

56. St John of the Cross, *The Ascent of Mount Carmel*, 115.

57. D. Suzuki, *Mysticism, Christian and Buddhist* (London: Unwin Hyman, 1979) 14.

58. Suzuki, *Mysticism*, 41.

59. See Mitchell and Rose, *Feminine Sexuality*, 147.

ending quest with no ultimate satisfaction, that is, to masculine jouissance. It is never-ending because the desire is ultimately based on the lost object, an object which was never in fact possessed but which could be seen as standing in metaphorically for the mother. But the conceptualization goes further and Lacan begins to see the object, not so much as that which we advance towards, but as that which causes desire. Lacan calls this "object a". But all "object a" can do is keep our desire going, given that desire cannot obtain any fulfilment. Such desire, then, is hardly going to be what will lead us to God. For the religious person, it would seem that there must be something else.

In the Ethics Seminar, Lacan speaks of "that good which is sacrificed for desire"<sup>60</sup> – "that good" being jouissance – and he seems in part to favour this desire. He says that religions are occupied with this jouissance and its recuperation, as if one disallows the other: that is, as if one can have either jouissance or desire but not both.

But, in the essay, "The Subversion of the Subject", Lacan says "For desire is a defence, a prohibition against going beyond a certain limit in jouissance."<sup>61</sup> Jonathan Lee suggests that, though Lacan seems in the Ethics Seminar to value desire as limited by moral law, he goes beyond this in his further developments of the concept of jouissance and desire. That is, he hints at a form of desire other than that constrained by the moral law.<sup>62</sup>

Desire, for Lacan, is partly caused by phantasy, which substitutes for the jouissance lost at castration. It is easy to see that, limited to this understanding, desire could not lead to God. But in Lacan, at the end of analysis, there is also a traversing or crossing of the phantasy.<sup>63</sup> Analysis involves movement towards the death of narcissism and the taking on of one's desire, a process in which the phantasy products that fill the hole left by the Symbolic themselves need to be traversed. It would seem, then, that for Lacan one who makes this journey is willing to go beyond desire to a pursuit of jouissance that could be considered close to the path of the mystic or saint. The traversing of the phantasy at the end of analysis seems to mean a passing beyond desire or, better put, a movement to a purified desire. We can, in fact, see in all of this a quest for more and more purity. At one point, according to Marcelle Marini, Lacan describes analysis as a pure experience of pure desire – something that allows the person to create a vacuum where the "forever revealed-revealing word can come".<sup>64</sup> It is here, perhaps, that we approximate

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60. Lacan, *Ethics of Psychoanalysis*, 322.

61. Lacan, *Écrits*, 322.

62. J. Lee, *Jacques Lacan* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1990) 169.

63. J. Lacan, *The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psycho-Analysis* (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1979) 273.

64. M. Marini, *Jacques Lacan: The French Context* (New York: Rutgers University Press, 1992) 83.

religious desire with its never-ending quest. Here, too, we see that Lacan, in his treatment of desire, does not stay at a simple bringing of a person to his or her own desire; beyond this, there is something else.

It does not seem, then, that for Lacan desire is totally discordant with jouissance. True, this "other jouissance" involves a going beyond desire. But if the person had not started the (ad)venture into desire he or she would have remained stuck in the imaginary as objects simply of another's desire.

This feminine jouissance seems to be a presence of an infinite desire. It is a desire that Lacan suggests can in some way "reach another" and is, in the end, neither masculine jouissance nor a finding of the "object a" (the cause of desire) but rather an experience of something that few can write about but of which the mystic perhaps has some awareness.

For Lacan, the only kind of love that can coexist with desire seems to be a love that goes beyond the law (see Paul in Romans 13:8-10), a love of difference and otherness, of what is beyond the identifications that constitute one's previous identity.<sup>65</sup> Perhaps associated with this kind of love is: "that of the moment when the satisfaction of the subject finds a way to realize himself (*sic*) in the satisfaction of everybody".<sup>66</sup> It may be, then, that the desire of the mystic goes alongside love and jouissance. And while the Christian understanding would see here an achievement of divine grace, there is also a journey to be undertaken, as the titles of Angelus Silesius' work *The Cherubic Wanderer* and Bunyan's *Pilgrim's Progress* suggest. This journey may, as we have seen, involve passing through a "dark night".

What about Buddhism and Christianity? Is there a desire co-extensive with union and Nirvana, or does one preclude the other, as Schneiderman has maintained?

We have seen how for Lacan the two can be seen to go together. In the Ethics Seminar Lacan, speaking about emptiness, lack and religion, first says that "religion in all its forms consists of avoiding this emptiness".<sup>67</sup> But he rejects this formula of "avoiding" for that of "respecting" the emptiness.<sup>68</sup> I have already shown how both Buddhism and Christianity respect this emptiness and how it is at the centre of their mystical endeavours. The emptiness is not closed when one achieves union or Nirvana. John of the Cross, almost in opposition to Schneiderman's thesis, speaks of the infinite capacity of the soul's caverns to desire.<sup>69</sup> He asks the same question that Schneiderman and we are asking: "How comes it, O God that it (the soul) yearns for him

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65. Lacan, *Four Fundamental Concepts*, 276.

66. Lacan, *Écrits*, 105.

67. Lacan, *Ethics of Psychoanalysis*, 130.

68. Lacan, *Ethics of Psychoanalysis*, 130.

69. St John of the Cross, *Living Flame of Love*, 71.

whom it already possesses, given that when the soul desires God with entire truth, it already possesses him?"<sup>70</sup>

John speaks here, as Schneiderman does, of the angels. It seems to him that the angels do not have pain and yearning and weariness and yet, because they have no weariness, they continually desire. But, unlike Schneiderman, John comes to the conclusion that angels do desire because they are not hindered by the weariness that stems from satiation (involvement in egoic concerns). He says of the soul: "the greater is the desire of the soul in this state, the more satisfaction and desire it should experience".<sup>71</sup> So, it is in the relationship of absence that God is found.

Similarly for the Buddhist. While there is no talk of desire in the sense we are using the term here, there is talk of lack and the need to keep and purify this lack, There is also talk of Nirvana. But Nirvana does not close the gap caused by lack. In Mahayana Buddhism Nirvana, in the end, is lack. It can be referred to as emptiness (*sunyata*) or the void.

So in all three discourses we have a notion of lack and desire, and one of jouissance. It is interesting to see that Schneiderman takes Plotinus as exemplifying desire. Yet the aim of Plotinian mysticism is a merging with the divine. In Christianity, on the other hand, there is never a merging, but more a marriage, where difference exists and desire exists. At the end of psychoanalysis, there is an identification of the person with the symptom. In Buddhism there is the realization that Nirvana is also *samsara*, *samsara* being that which limits and keeps desire going.

#### CONCLUSION

Where then do we stand on the questions with which we began? Is religion the death of desire or is religion a manifestation of a pure desire, one that can lead to God?

By bringing the traditions of Christianity and Buddhism into dialogue with psychoanalysis, particularly the psychoanalysis inspired by Lacan, I think we can see, firstly, that the concept of desire, as it is used within each of the three discourses, is not to be taken univocally. In Buddhism, as partly also in John of the Cross, one aspect of desire corresponds to what Lacan would call imaginary, narcissistic desire. It is desire in this form that the three discourses rail against. For Lacan, as it is for the religious practitioners, this desire alienates us. Desire for Lacan is intimately tied up with others and with an Other. We could be tempted to see this Other as God but that would be erroneous. For Lacan the Other is not complete either; it is also lacking and is barred. For the mystic also, this is true, as seen in the Buddhist saying: "If you

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70. St John of the Cross, *Living Flame of Love*, 71.

71. St John of the Cross, *Living Flame of Love*, 173.

meet the Buddha on the road, kill him", and Eckhart's saying: "God passes away".<sup>72</sup>

Lacan recognises a desire which can be one's own and which is unsatisfactory. But this is not to negate desire. We see in Lacan a constant purification of desire – one which can be seen as an initiation through desire, though it is not an initiation to another *jouissance*. Lacan did not regard psychoanalysis as an initiation to another *jouissance*.<sup>73</sup> But the Lacanian psychoanalyst Bice Benvenuto suggests that perhaps Lacan did think that psychoanalysis was able to bring a person to the beginning of this initiatory status.<sup>74</sup> She herself thinks that psychoanalysis is an initiation, one like the Dionysiac initiation, but she too thinks that the mystical initiation is beyond psychoanalysis.<sup>75</sup>

John of the Cross takes up desire but also seems to go beyond it, to an encounter with a *jouissance* which is more pleasurable. It is something else. Lacan is quite clear that John and Teresa experience this something else.<sup>76</sup> In their journey through a praxis of desire they have gone further than desire, as has the Buddhist mystic. For Christianity and Buddhism, religious thinking is a thinking informed by desire. The theology of the future according to Charles Winqvist is a theology of desire.<sup>77</sup> Christianity is also a therapy of desire, as is Buddhism and psychoanalysis, even if Christianity and Buddhism are more than that. Michel de Certeau in the last page of his book *The Mystic Fable*, commenting on Hadewijch of Anvers and Angelus Silesius, speaks of the mystic as "drunk with desire", as someone "who cannot stop walking and with the certainty of what is lacking, knows of everyplace and object that it is not that". He maintains that "Desire creates an excess" – creates, that is, precisely that which is beyond itself, beyond desire.<sup>78</sup> It is this excess that the saints of the different traditions reach. So desire is central to the religious quest. Rather than quenching desire, religion seeks to increase it, even though in the long run there is something more.

Where then do we place Lacan in relationship to these two traditions of desire? Is he a Buddhist or a Christian? And is religion a psychoanalysis? A quick response would be that Lacan is neither. And neither is Christianity a psychoanalysis. But all three discourses are concerned with desire. Christianity and Buddhism have their saints and maybe psychoanalysis does too, for as Lacan says, "saints are the

72. Quoted in Suzuki, *Mysticism*, 10.

73. Lacan, *Écrits*, 7.

74. B. Benvenuto, *Concerning the Rites of Psychoanalysis Or the Villa of the Mysteries* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1994) 150.

75. Benvenuto, *Concerning the Rites*, 150.

76. See Mitchell and Rose, *Feminine Sexuality*, 146-47.

77. C. Winqvist, "Body, Text, and Imagination" in T. Altizer (ed.), *Deconstruction and Theology* (New York: Crossroad, 1982) 198; see also *Desiring Theology* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995).

78. M. de Certeau, *The Mystic Fable* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992) 299.

administrators of the access to desire"<sup>79</sup> and it is interesting to note that his own writings feature the same rhetorical style as that of the mystics.<sup>80</sup>

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79. Lacan, *Ethics of Psychoanalysis*, 262.

80. See Mitchell and Rose, *Feminine Sexuality*, 147.