

LACAN AND THEOLOGY:  
GETTING PAST THE DEADLOCKS OF POST-MODERNISM

Aron Dunlap, *Temple University*

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--It thinks, it fails, it laughs.  
Jacques Lacan, *My Teaching*

In a speech delivered to an audience of medical professionals at a psychiatric hospital in 1967, Lacan recalled a student of his who claimed that he, Lacan, was like Christ. To which Lacan replied that he really felt more like Pilate, being not the one who embodies Truth, but one who questions “the truth.” One might say that this scene in the gospels of Jesus standing before Pilate determines the future relationship between theology and psychoanalysis. Christ is the symptom here, the bone in the throat of his people, the scapegoat who must die so greater Israel may live. Pilate is the analyst, curious about the nature of this symptom, putting the eternal question to it: What is truth? To which the symptom remains silent. Pilate understands and yet he doesn’t. He sees no reason to kill this man, yet he cedes to the will of the majority and washes his hands of the matter. It is, perhaps, as Caiaphas noted, expedient that one man should die for the people, yet the silence of Christ in the face of this logic does not denote consent. The truth, as Lacan noted in his only television appearance, cannot be spoken in so many words. Thus, psychoanalysis gets its grip where words fail. Where words fail, the symptom becomes manifest, and this revelation determines what we know of the truth.<sup>1</sup>

Where words fail, the Word becomes manifest. It was perhaps fated that Christian theology should have followed Pilate’s query whilst knowing nothing of the Truth standing there, as body and symptom, silent because the drives are silent. The discourse between psychoanalysis and theology should arise out of this mute and broken body. Surprisingly enough it is psychoanalysis which has rooted itself in that body more than theology or any other discourse of the last century. So, Christian theology has something to learn from psychoanalysis, but I will also argue that carrying further psychoanalytic insights can be done only by a discourse informed by Christian theology. To my knowledge, there has been no sustained exploration, in the English speaking world at least, along these lines. I see my project in stark opposition to the way almost all religious thinkers have thus far read Lacan, namely, as a postmodern whose effectiveness is more or less limited to leveling a critique at any tendency towards dogmatism in theological thought. My argument will touch on three major themes: the

sexual analogy in the Bible, the importance of correctly understanding the theological tradition of apophaticism in today's intellectual climate, and the Cartesian dream,

### **The Sexual Analogy in the Bible**

Freud, it should be remembered, was never analyzed – for one doesn't analyze oneself. Lacan notes in Seminar XI that, "the truth is perhaps simply one thing, namely the desire of Freud himself, the fact that something in Freud was never analysed."<sup>2</sup> What is the desire of Freud, then, that determines the course of psychoanalysis? Its proper context, in my opinion, is a subject that attracted Freud magnetically and which he disavowed creatively. Simply put, it's the Christian Biblical narrative, which can be summed up as the story, with all its ups and downs, of the relationship between God and God's creation. The fundamental determining factor in this relationship is how men and women, as the crown and stewards of creation, decide to put the gift of their freedom to use: whether to love God, and consequently all of creation, or whether to reject that love and pursue the power and knowledge which might free them from the tyranny of God and God's love. The Bible makes use of the sexual analogy to undertake this narrative, which analogy operates on two unequal levels. Following the language of Russian orthodox theologian Sergius Bulgakov, I will call these the creaturely and Divine levels.

At the level of the divine, God is not sexual. For an ancient reader, this is the first thing you would notice about the Biblical creation story, especially if you were familiar with the Egyptian or Babylonian myths. God is depicted as male, and the female aspect is simply missing. But from the creaturely perspective, God himself is strangely implicated with Adam and Eve in the garden, in that when he comes to walk with Adam and Eve in the cool part of the afternoon, and finds them hiding from him, he angrily exclaims, "Who told you that you were naked?" – as if their nakedness was a kind of secret of God's, something no one else was supposed to know about. Such a response brings up the specter of the child abuser. Whatever interpretation one brings to bear on this passage, it is clear that God's relationship with his creation prior to the fall was so intimate that, from the creaturely perspective, it functions at or beyond the limit of sexual relationship, in the zone of incest and what is universally condemned as sexual crime. Whatever that bond is in itself, shame, and the consequent covering up, destroys it. When Adam and Eve eat of the fruit of the tree, they are embarrassed in front of each other, but they are also embarrassed in front of God.

The sexual analogy continues throughout the entire Bible. A few examples will suffice to show its importance. Circumcision is the mark of God's covenant with his people, the proof of relationship, however scarred. The fact that it involves, what for surrounding peoples was quite grotesque, namely the cutting of the male's foreskin, means that the process of regenerating a relationship with God must take the form of a subjectification of the symbol of man's creativity and power. The phallus is the most intimate physical proof of creative power. In joining into a covenant one is sacrificing some of that power to God. One is offering a first-fruit, a tithe, of one's own body. Simply put, where Adam and Eve failed to obey an easy commandment, Abraham and

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his children must obey a difficult one. It shouldn't be forgotten that Abraham was circumcised as an old man.

The language of marriage is used to talk about God's desire for communion with his people. He wants to be married to them, but they cheat on him. They worship gods from other nations. As in the case of King Solomon of whom we read:

King Solomon loved many foreign women along with the daughter of Pharaoh: Moabite, Ammonite, Edomite, Sidonian, and Hittite women, from the nations concerning which the Lord had said to the Israelites, 'You shall not enter into marriage with them, neither shall they with you; for they will surely incline your heart to follow their gods;' Solomon clung to these in love. (I Kings 11:1-2, NRSV)

Idolatry and adultery are, at this level, identical. In the prophet Hosea, God has his prophet take a prostitute to teach the people a lesson about faithfulness. In this text, Israel and Judah are likened to a woman scorned that the Lord eventually reconciles with:

Therefore, I will now persuade her,  
and bring her into the wilderness,  
and speak tenderly to her.  
From there I will give her her vineyards,  
and make the Valley of Achor a door of hope.  
There she shall respond as in the days of her youth,  
as at the time when she came out of the land of Egypt.  
On that day, says the Lord, you will call me, 'My husband', and no longer  
will you call me, 'My Baal'. (Hosea 2: 14-16)

"Baal" translates as master or lord, and so this marriage between God and his people would seem to heal the curse laid upon Eve in which she desires a man who lords it over her.

The same analogy dominates in the book of Jeremiah, where we have God being married to twin sisters, representing Israel and Judah. Things had been great early on between them, as the Lord recalls it: "I remember the devotion of your youth, your love as a bride, how you followed me in the wilderness, in a land not sown. Israel was holy to the Lord, the first fruits of his harvest." (Jeremiah 2:2) But then she became unfaithful, and God compares her to an animal in heat, "a restive young camel interlacing her tracks, a wild ass at home in the wilderness, in her heat sniffing the wind! Who can restrain her lust?" (Jeremiah 2:23-24) But even in Jeremiah there are words that

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promise reconciliation, which promise that “there shall once more be heard the voice of mirth and the voice of gladness, the voice of the bridegroom and the voice of the bride, the voices of those who sing, as they bring thank offerings to the house of the Lord” (Jeremiah 33:10-11)

In the gospels it would seem that the sexual analogy drops out. But I would argue that it simply becomes problematized by the fact that Jesus, as God, cannot be in and of himself sexual. In fact, Jesus’ asexuality mimics the peculiar nature of his father in Genesis, who, though he is primarily a creating God, does so in the absence of sex. But, just like Jahweh is implicated in the sexuality of Adam and Eve, we must assume something similar when this God takes on flesh. We have already considered Christ standing battered and bruised in front of Pilate. But there is also the Christ stripped of his robe and stuck to a tree. Traditionally, the cross on which he hangs is made from the wood of the tree of knowledge of good and evil, and it is planted directly in the skull of Adam, who along with his wife, stood naked under that tree and were ashamed. From Adam to Christ, men and women have been nailed to a tree of shame, but Christ, with no fig leaves to assist him (though artists have often supplied them), with not *one* sin on his conscience, but all of them, nevertheless hangs there unashamed. His mother, the second Eve to this second Adam, gazes up at him, with tears but without shame.

Sexuality is a thread which ties together the Divine and creaturely levels. On the creaturely level, we are talking about sexual union, or marriage, and the children which are produced. The incest taboo is the limit of communion from the side of creation. It is precisely this limit which is transgressed by the Divine. The book of Revelation sees the end of history as the marriage feast of the Lamb in which the church is joined to its savior, the bride with the bridegroom, the church being also the body of Christ, who is its head. Mary, as the representative of the church, its chief saint, is thus depicted as marrying her son.

Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth; for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away, and the sea was no more. And I saw the holy city, the new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband. (Revelation 21:1-2)

So it is not that the Christian God is simply asexual. From the Divine perspective God is lacking sexuality, but from the creaturely He has it in excess. When Freud attempted to articulate a myth that might challenge the Biblical one while remaining true to Darwinian principles, he came up with something that is assuredly more dependent on the Bible than on Darwin. Is not his primal father precisely this figure of a being with so much of an excess of sexuality that he is completely outside of the domain of the law and the incest taboo? But of course since Freud takes out the Divine plane he ends up inverting much of the Christian myth. So instead of the son dying for the father, in Freud’s myth the birth of the law comes with the pride of brothers murdering their father. And instead of a father who loves men and women inasmuch as they are free, the

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primal father's love is one of complete domination. These are difficulties which the Bible itself does not shy away from. Genesis 1-3, for example, lends itself to two completely paradoxical readings: On the one hand, God is the creator who shows his love to his creation by giving them freedom. On the other, God is an abuser who has trapped Adam and Eve in Eden. Certain Gnostics even went so far as to say that this evil god was a usurper, and that behind him was the beneficent goddess who sent the serpent to free humanity from its cage. This reading re-sexualizes the story by joining the goddess with her old phallic friend. I would argue though, that, while the paradox from the Divine perspective involves a both/and, the paradox of creaturely interpretation is an either/or, in which the incorrect option must be rejected, not to limit God, but precisely to save God's divine paradoxicality.

**The Apophatic Tradition**

It is this paradoxical nature that stands behind the ancient doctrine of apophaticism, which can be understood as a way to approach the difference between the Divine and creaturely perspectives, a difference which has its roots in Trinitarian logic. Unfortunately, the current vogue of this doctrine as evidenced in the writings of postmodernists such as Thomas Carlson and Charles Winquist tends to use apophaticism, or negative theology, only to argue against any doctrinal surety. But as the Russian orthodox theologian Vladimir Lossky has argued, it is apophaticism which is at the heart of doctrines like the Trinity. Citing the words Pseudo-Dionysius Lossky states that: "The apophatic way does not lead to an absence, to an utter emptiness; for the unknowable God of the Christian is not the impersonal God of the philosophers. It is to the Holy Trinity, 'superessential, more than divine and more than good.'"<sup>3</sup>

The doctrine of the Trinity is paradoxical in that while the Trinity can never be anything other than three, our knowledge of this does not leave the essence of God any less mysterious. Logos, as the Word and image of the father, expresses his Father perfectly and leaves nothing of his Father unimagined; but inasmuch as the Word is his own hypostasis, his own person, the hypostasis of the father is left completely mysterious. The paradox is this: inasmuch as Christ is a perfect image of the Father, the father is left completely in the dark. All that can really be said is that he is the Origin, Father, Creator, He from whom all things flow. From the limited creaturely perspective, the paradox is apparent in that Christians hold that God sends his son into the world out of love, yet what kind of love is appeased only by the blood of a son? The forensic view in which God demands justice in the form of innocent blood must be rejected to save the deeper paradox, that the God who said "Thou shalt not make a graven image," appeared, not only as image, but as flesh.

Christ replaces the Father in a way that, at first glance, might look similar to the way in which the band of brothers replace Freud's primal father by murdering him. But whereas the brothers, upon killing their father, immediately pronounce the law regulating sexual conduct because of their guilt, Christ as the Word of the Father is not the utterance of a Law but the revelation of silence. Christ, in standing mute before Pilate can give no better evidence that He is the child of his Father. In Lacanian terms what is being revealed here is the silence of the drives, which do not find satisfaction in

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an object but endlessly circle any number of objects. It is the desire of the drive for its desire to remain unfulfilled, for it is desire pure and simple, desire in itself. In this way Lacan recalls the authentic apophatic tradition in which the arbitrary specificity of the symptom is not a limit on desire but precisely the gate to unending desire, and perhaps even unending fulfillment.

**The Cartesian Dream**

It is perhaps easy to forget that when Descartes laid out his system of rationality, mathematical certainty, and radical doubt, he first made the assumption that all his meditations could very well be just a dream.

I will suppose not a supremely good God, the source of truth, but rather an evil genius, supremely powerful and clever, who has directed his entire effort at deceiving me. I will regard the heavens, the air, the earth, colors, shapes, sounds, and all external things as nothing but the bedeviling hoaxes of my dreams, with which he lays snares for my credulity.<sup>4</sup>

Thinking, for Descartes, is not strongly differentiated from dreaming, and so in one fell swoop the activities of the mind become the ultimate ground of our being, while simultaneously opening up the possibility that all of reality could be a dream and illusion. In what way, then, is Lacan Cartesian? First of all, Lacan accepts the fact that science has wiggled its way into every aspect of our lives, by which he does not mean that one simply needs a cell phone to get along nowadays. As he says:

It was from Monsieur Descartes onwards that certain things happened, and they are certainly worthy of note, especially the inauguration of our modern science, a science whose distinguishing feature is the somewhat compelling efficacy that allows it to intervene in the most everyday details of everyone's life."<sup>5</sup>

One cannot escape the dream of science, not even by running away to a cabin in the wilderness. Such a move only inverts the dream, which is fundamentally that of the totality and of domination. It substitutes Nature for Science, but in the form of the dream of Science. What is key in this dream as Descartes formulated it is the possibility for absolute certainty. This is why dreaming is an essential assumption for Descartes, for even if it were all a dream and all his thought only doubting, he nevertheless has proof that the fact of thinking itself (whether it be dreaming or doubting) is not an illusion. It seems that the thought, "I think, therefore I am," is completely transparent to itself, in that the act of thought itself cannot be doubted. It was Descartes' dream that this certainty could be extended to every branch of knowledge, and could even replace theology – at least it could offer a more convincing proof of God's existence to unbelievers than an argument from faith ever could.

And yet something resists the tyranny of knowledge, something resists this drive to remake all things in the form of transparent thought. For Lacan this resistance is the Real, the unconscious, and the aim of analysis is to bring the suffering patient back into

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proximity with that which cannot be understood, “bringing about the patient’ readaptation to the real.”<sup>6</sup> Lacan is Cartesian because he knows that such a project can only be undertaken in a situation in which the scientific model built upon Cartesian principles has insinuated itself into every aspect of our lives. To mathematicize passion is the obscene desire of scientific discourse, the discourse of the master. According to Lacan:

The work of the philosophers gave us to suppose that thought is a self-transparent act, that a thought that knows it is thinking is the ultimate criterion, the essence of truth. Everything we thought we should purify ourselves of, rid ourselves of, in order to isolate the process of thought, namely our passions, our desires, our anxieties, and even our colics, our fears, our follies, all that seemed simply to bear witness to intrusion within us of what someone like Descartes call the body because, at the cutting edge of this purification of truth, we find that there is no point at which we can grasp that thought is divisible.<sup>7</sup>

The artistic expression of this in our day is not the robot who wants to become human, to feel things, but the human who wants to become a robot. The cliché of the former is a foil for the much darker truth of the latter. In the language of Star Trek, the truth of the matter is not the robot, Data, wanting to love a woman, but it is captain Picard turning the frustration of love into the absoluteness of domination: “I am borg; resistance is futile.” In theological terms the desire of science is to overwrite the divine image, the “I am who I am,” in creation, with an image of creation’s devising. Science fiction shows us the way here, for science is always a fiction. It is something that is made, to overwrite that which is given, with the express desire to, as Descartes said, become “lords and masters of nature.”<sup>8</sup>

It seems to me that Lacan is more or less agreeing with what the Bible says about knowledge, *scientia*, that it is a replacement for a kind of knowing that can only be described from the creaturely perspective as sexual. Though we might think of science as a collection of specialities – for who can understand what is written in a scientific journal save the specialists? – this is just another foil, for science as knowledge desires to become the leading analogy, permeating every aspect of life, which could replace the sexual analogy. Inasmuch as the sexual analogy always leads to an apophatic ignorance, whereas knowledge pursues certainty, psychoanalysis challenges the scientific worldview just as much as the standpoint of faith does. As Lacan says, “sexuality makes a hole in truth.”<sup>9</sup> Making a hole in truth, is this not exactly what the silent Christ did when Pilate asks his prophetic question? What is truth? In resisting the domination of knowledge, both psychoanalysis and theology are also challenging its unavoidable correlate, that the Real is of no concern to us.

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<sup>1</sup> Jacques Lacan, *My Teaching* (London: Verson, 2008), 18-19.

<sup>2</sup> Jacques Lacan, *Seminar XI* (Norton: New York, 1978) trans. Alan Sheridan, 12.

<sup>3</sup> Vladimir Lossky, *The Mystical Theology of the Eastern Church* (St. Vladimir's Seminary Press: New York, 1976) 43.

<sup>4</sup> René Descartes, *Meditations on First Philosophy* (Hackett Publishing Company: Indianapolis, 1993) trans. Donald A. Cress, 16.

<sup>5</sup> *My Teaching*, 96

<sup>6</sup> (seminar I, 18).

<sup>7</sup> Lacan, *My Teaching* 102

<sup>8</sup> René Descartes, cited in Thomas Carlson, *The Indiscrete Image* (University of Chicago Press: Chicago, 2008), 11.

<sup>9</sup> *My Teaching*, 21.