

## **Soul Friend**

Kenneth Leech's "Soul Friend" remains a classic introduction in Christian (and especially Anglican) circles to the subject of spiritual direction. First published at the end of the 70s, then revised in the 90s with suitable responses to the awakening spirituality in the UK and the US of the post-Thatcherite / Reaganite generation, a generation that had grown up in a spirit of materialism and realised that there was more to life. When Leech wrote an introduction to his revised edition he said:

"When I wrote the book, it was common to find writers lamenting the decline of the priest as pastor and speaking of a 'crisis of identity'. For example, it was claimed that 'the ordained man is no longer wanted, as he was a few years ago, in helping people with their interpersonal relationships'. The priest therefore is reduced to either searching around frantically for a new role, or dealing 'almost exclusively with that remnant, continually getting smaller, who faithfully attend public worship' ... From my experience, I did not believe these claims were true. On the contrary, the picture which I saw, as a parish priest in the East End of London, was of a society in which more and more people were looking for some sense of spiritual direction, and the problem of priests and others was how to meet that need adequately without being overwhelmed ... Writing over thirty years ago, Thornton predicted 'the beginning of a religious revival of a deep and subtle type', and he went on to contrast the approach of the

spiritual guide with that of evangelists, 'youth experts', preachers, and church organisers. 'The former group are concerned with how a demand for their ministrations can be created; the latter with how the growing demand for guidance can be met' ... The 'crisis of identity' among many priests had occurred at the very time that thousands of people were seeking spiritual guidance and could not find it. **I wondered if perhaps the reason many clergy felt underemployed was that what they had to offer was not what was needed.**"<sup>1</sup>

This then was the initial position that Leech sought to deal with – Christian pastors seemed no longer to be in touch with the spiritual needs of their parish, let alone their church congregation (even by the 70s it was vastly evident that the two were completely separate things).

Observing the "Spiritual Quest of Youth", Leech noted that the studious, modernistic, atheism of the art deco and then post-war decades fell away into a spiritual search in the 60s, but a search that almost de facto rejected Christianity as a possibility. Instead, a movement to Eastern religions and philosophies (especially variants of Hinduism) became popular, especially within the media, and alongside a perceived sexual liberation also came a level of promiscuity in the use of narcotics to stimulate the mind. Indeed, for many LSD and the like became the vehicles to engage with God, drawing not just on Vedic practices but also the Australian Aboriginal "Dreamtime" and the pipe-smoking exercises of the

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<sup>1</sup> Leech, Kenneth; *Soul Friend*; pp xiii-xiv

Native Americans. The notion of an external, personal deity became replaced by “God in a Pill” and the search within for the divine.

Leech comments that alongside this rejection of traditional Christian religion there was a noticeable “Jesus movement” sub-culture, especially in the US (and the West Coast of the US). Interestingly, Leech writes how the British version of the Jesus Movement was actually highly commercial, being driven not so much from the grassroots but from leading Evangelical organisations<sup>2</sup>. Regardless, Leech identifies in the movements on both sides of the Atlantic:

“a reaction against the vague liberalism of the 1960s when people spoke gleefully of ‘the end of ideology’ and saw dogma and polemics as belonging to the pre-ecumenical age ... They are literalist in their approach to the Bible , again a reaction against the tendency in much of western Christianity to study the text of the Scripture but neglect its message. They are also associated with, and influenced by, neo-Pentecostalism, a witness to their need for direct experience of God and for the freedom of the Spirit to praise him. They hold rigid views in most cases about non-marital sex, homosexuality, and many of the ‘progressive’ attitudes in the contemporary West, which they are inclined to attribute to the work of demons. They are marked most of all by a strong sense of a personal relationship to Jesus, and are dominated by hope of his future return.”<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Leech, Kenneth; *Soul Friend*; p16

<sup>3</sup> Leech, Kenneth; *Soul Friend*; p16

In the United Kingdom the Jesus Movement, while expressed in groups such as the Family of God and the Jesus Army, primarily asserted itself in the new house churches, whether home grown like Pioneer, New Frontiers and Ichthus, or imported American denominations like the Vineyard. What links them all is a rediscovery of the Charismatic, a rediscovery that, while beginning largely in the community of those who had removed themselves for one reason or the other from the established churches, over the next 2 decades literally re-infected the mainstream denominations.

Alongside this Charismatic upsurge Leech also identifies the emergence of the radical wing of Christianity, grounded in a gospel of liberation and freedom. While its geographic home was Latin America and the initial struggle for economic and political liberation, this emphasis on justice has been translated by some into a struggle for equality for all kinds of people and experiences. Whilst in the Developing World the liberation movement has been concerned with an interaction with the basic fundamentals of human dignity (for example the struggles against bonded labour in Latin America and against Apartheid in South Africa<sup>4</sup>), in the West it has turned itself more to the discussion of individual human freedom and liberty of action, action which it perceives to be both holy and to have been constrained, incorrectly, by the institutional church. For example, the gospel of liberation in the West has found itself in recent years

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<sup>4</sup> For an excellent and fair Evangelical treatment of liberation theology AND an equitable treatment of the theological roots of Apartheid, Michael Cassidy's "This Passing Summer" (H&S 1989) is a fascinating read.

accented in the debate over homosexuality and the rightness or otherwise of gay unions. Perhaps this is best summed up by this publication of ECUSA:

“For almost forty years, members of the Episcopal Church have discerned holiness in same-sex relationships and, have come to support the blessing of such unions and the ordination or consecration of persons in those unions. Christian congregations have sought to celebrate and bless same-sex unions because these exclusive, life-long, unions of fidelity and care for each other have been experience as holy”<sup>5</sup>.

Of course, the delineation between the charismatic and the liberationist is not as easy to make in practice as I have at first made out. Both movements, as Leech points out, are responses to the institutional and (perceived to be) spiritually dead church of the modernistic 20s to 50s. As such they both spring from a rediscovery of the heart of the message of Jesus, drawing on particular teachings and practices of Christ. The two communities, though at some times seemingly diametrically opposed often share the same mentor figures. Witness for example the way that Oscar Romero, the martyred Roman Catholic Archbishop of El Salvador has been venerated not only the Roman Catholic liberation movement but equally by the most ardent reformed and charismatic Protestants. Leech uses examples like this to indicate that these two aspects of the resurgence of Christian faith in actuality draw deeply from the same wells and have several, at first seemingly unlikely, points of contact.

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<sup>5</sup> *To Set our Hope on Christ*; p8

Leech then presents how the resurgence of interest in spirituality has led those involved in these restatements of Christian faith to desire a deeper relationship with God. He identifies that:

“Taking them together, we can identify a series of major consequences which have resulted in some areas: the increase in direct simple testimony to God’s power, a deeper sense of God’s presence and power in prayer, a sense of the Bible having ‘come alive’, a greater degree of warmth in fellowship within Christian communities, a deeper appreciation of the variety of spiritual gifts, not only that of ‘tongues’, **and frequently profound character changes in individual Christians.** There is no question that these are results which can and do enrich the body of Christ ... For many the Charismatic experience may represent the beginnings of contemplative prayer ... Therefore careful and informed spiritual direction is essential if the Charismatic movement is to make progress. The movement needs to create within it a network of spiritual guides who can help individuals through peak experiences **and enable them to cope with the inevitable experience of darkness for which traditional Pentecostal spirituality may leave them unprepared.**”<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> Leech, Kenneth; *Soul Friend*; pp27-28

## Pre-Reformation Spirituality and the journey to Purgation

This observation and challenge is the launching point for Leech's journey through the history of Christian Spiritual Direction. In the second chapter of *Soul Friend* he traces how from the Desert Fathers the idea of a "Spiritual Father" (*pneumatikos pater*) has dominated the heart of the devotional life of believers<sup>7</sup>. Beginning in Egypt and the Levant, monastic fathers like St Anthony began at first to seek their own communion with God by separating from society, but soon found that others wanted to learn from their experiences. Very quickly the rejection of extreme asceticism (in a similar manner 1500 years later that Sadhu Sundar Singh rejected the asceticism of the Hindu mystics<sup>8</sup>) did not rule out silence and solitude which became one of the essentials on which the desert mysticism survived. The emphasis on silent devotion led to the first promulgations on systematised prayer by Evagrius and then John Cassian's "Conferences", written before his move to Marseilles. The Marseilles monastery developed a pattern of regular prayer (a six-fold office), regular Eucharistic devotion and confession. Interestingly (and something we will return to) this is exactly the pattern of life that Mario Bergner has recently written on in an article on classical Spiritual Direction<sup>9</sup>.

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<sup>7</sup> A large part of the following is taken from Leech, Kenneth; *Soul Friend*; pp30-85, with additional original commentary and observation

<sup>8</sup> <http://www.sadhusundarsingh.homestead.com/files/introduction.html> for a short biography

<sup>9</sup> [http://www.redeemedlives.org/Resources/Nws\\_atcl/2004/spring04spiritualdirection-1.htm](http://www.redeemedlives.org/Resources/Nws_atcl/2004/spring04spiritualdirection-1.htm) and see later in this piece.

The idea of a spiritual Father continues to develop especially within the eastern tradition with classic texts such as St Dorotheos' "Directions on Spiritual Training". By the eight century then we have a clear tradition in place of surrender to the experience of an (older and) wiser Christian, and confession to "spiritual men who have experience of souls"<sup>10</sup>. Three hundred years later, St Simeon the New Theologian is still advising that "to put everything in the hands of your spiritual father, as in the hands of God, is an act of perfect faith".

In the west the idea of authority was more driven towards the ecclesiastical structures than individual accountabilities, though a number of thriving monastic communities did emerge. While pastoral care was practised on the ground on the front-line of the church's ministry, a large part of the important writing on the subject came from the ecclesiastical leadership. In particular, Gregory the Great devoted a whole volume of his *Pastoral Rule* to the different types of guidance that the church leadership should give. As Leech says:

"He emphasises three essential interior dispositions in the pastor and guide of souls: zeal for right conduct and discipline; love learning, patience, pity, and a desire to adapt to all and condescend to all; and humility, the guarantee of purity of intention. Gregory referred to "priestly heart" as a heart of which was attached only to the search for God and the good of the neighbour, and he extolled the virtue of discretion which was made up of discernment, moderation and confession."<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> Anastasius the Sinaite

<sup>11</sup> Leech, Kenneth; *Soul Friend*; p45

Meanwhile, on the Celtic fringes of the Western Church the likes of Patrick and Columba were busy establishing spiritual guidance in the British Isles. Taking the Irish concept of an *anmchara* (“spiritual guide”), often the druid at the chief’s court, Columba encouraged everybody to have a “soul-friend”, though he was clear that the soul-friend should be of an orthodox nature, going as far as refusing to be the mentor of some people, and expelling other bishops who were still practising pagan arts.

As in the east, the “soul-friend” was not necessarily an ordained person (and given that large numbers of the monastic orders who provided spiritual oversight were lay, necessarily so) and so the notion of having a specific person to pronounce absolution of sin was not considered of highest importance. Indeed, the Greek word for the soul-friend, *syncellus*, meant “one who shares a cell” and so the very notion of hierarchical relationships in spiritual discipleship was not a prevailing one. Of course, that did not mean that the one who was your soul-friend couldn’t be your superior, and with the emergence in the West of Benedictine monasticism, with its emphasis on obedience to the *pater spiritualis* (in the Benedictine tradition having more to do with one in authority over the other than spiritual wisdom imparted by the “father”) the two tended to merge, though the tradition prevalent in contemporary monastic communities to have different masters dealing with different aspects is a sign that the monastic communities were never ultimately utterly dictatorial regimes.

Without the monasteries spiritual direction also existed, with Jonas of Orlean's *De Institutione Laicali* an example of a popular level devotional (though of course "popular" in this context was limited to the few who could read). As the towns and cities of Mediaeval Europe grew, the number of urbanised clergy grew with them and the likes of Alcuin promoted a confessional life for not just the educated but all people:

"Come then, O penitent, confess thine own sins, lay bare by confession the secret of thine iniquity. Known unto God are those things which thou hast wrought in secret, which if the tongue have not spoken, yet the conscience will not be able to conceal. Tell thy sins by confession before thou feel the anger of the Judge ... Accordingly, my dearest son, listen to the remedy of confession. Lay open your wounds in confession that the medicaments of healing may be able to take effect in you."<sup>12</sup>

Of note in the development of the confessional relationship, especially in relationship to the specific pastoral situation we will later address, is the writing of Aelred of Rievaulx on friendship. Though he has been taken up by many gay-affirming groups as a patron saint<sup>13</sup> the assertion by John Boswell that he had been "gay" has little historical support and on a reading of *Spiritual Friendship* we find quite the opposite perspective:

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<sup>12</sup> Quoted in Leech, Kenneth; *Soul Friend*; p47

<sup>13</sup> For example <http://www.integrityusa.org/aelred/>

“38. Hence let one kind of friendship be called carnal, another worldly, and another spiritual. The carnal springs from mutual harmony in vice; the worldly is enkindled by the hope of gain; and the spiritual is spiritual is cemented by similarity of life, morals and pursuits among the just. 39. The real beginning of carnal friendship proceeds from an affection which like a harlot directs its step after every passer-by (Ezekiel 16:25) following its own lustful ears and eyes in every direction. (Numbers 15:39) By means of the avenues of these senses it brings into the mind itself images of beautiful bodies or voluptuous objects. To enjoy these as he pleases the carnal man thinks is blessedness, but to enjoy them without an associate he considers less delightful. 40. Then by gesture, nod, words, compliance, spirit is captivated by spirit and one is inflamed by the other, and they are kindled to form a sinful bond, so that, after they have entered upon such a deplorable pact, the one will do or suffer any crime or sacrilege whatsoever for the sake of the other. They consider nothing sweeter than this type of friendship, they judge nothing more equable, believing community of like and dislike to be imposed on them by the laws of friendship. 41 And so this sort of friendship is undertaken without deliberation, is tested by no act of judgement, is in no wise governed by reason; but through the violence of affection is carried away through divers paths, observing no limit, caring naught for uprightness, forseeing neither gains nor losses, but advancing toward everything heedlessly, indiscriminately, lightly and immoderately. For that reason, goaded on, as

if by furies, it is consummated by its own self, or is dissolved with the same levity with which it was originally fashioned.”<sup>14</sup>

And also:

“There are compacts - even sworn bonds - of union among the wicked which ought to be abhorred. These, clothed with the beautiful name of friendship, ought to have been distinguished from true friendship by law and precept, so that when true friendship was sought, one might not incautiously be ensnared among those other friendships because of some slight resemblance.”<sup>15</sup>

And even

“For that love which is shameful and unworthy of the name of friendship wherein anything foul is demanded of a friend; and this is precisely what one is forced to do, if, with vices in no wise dormant or subdued, he is either enticed or impelled to all sorts of illicit acts. Therefor one ought to detest the opinion of those who think one ought to act on behalf of a friend in a way detrimental to faith and uprightness. For it is not excuse for sin, that you sin for the sake of a friend.”<sup>16</sup>

The idea of deep friendship between men (and women) is of course a Biblical notion (i.e. David and Jonathan) and the very necessity to have friends is

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<sup>14</sup> Aelred of Rievaulx; *Spiritual Friendship*; 1:38-41

<sup>15</sup> Aelred of Rievaulx; *Spiritual Friendship*; 1:60

<sup>16</sup> Aelred of Rievaulx; *Spiritual Friendship*; 2:39-40

affirmed by Anselm who says “To live without friends is to live like a beast”. But the important thing to note about Anselm’s work is that it is produced for universal Christian discipleship, not to argue a particular viewpoint on sexuality – indeed that debate is simply not on his radar.

Probably the next great work on the subject of discipleship is Thomas á Kempis’ *Imitation of Christ* which achieved a level of popularity in Western society unrivalled by most other texts. Shortly after Catherine of Sienna became a popular spiritual director and Ferrer wrote *Treatise on the Spiritual Life*. In the immediate period before the Reformation and Trent, there was also a concentration on the spiritual life of clergy with Pecham’s *Oculus Sacerdotis*, Mirk’s *Manuale Sacerdotis* and de Montrocher’s *Confessio Sacramentalis* specific examples.

The onset of printing in the 15<sup>th</sup> Century transformed the literary environment of Europe, for where before books had to be handwritten and transcribed, now there was the opportunity to mass-produce devotional texts. That this technological advancement happened at the same time as the emergence of the great late-Renaissance spiritual writers has meant that the works of Ignatius, St John of the Cross and others of the same period very quickly became classic texts not just of their time, but texts with an ongoing impact.

Ignatius of Loyola was a former soldier whose enforced convalescence led to a spiritual encounter which developed into what are now known as the *Spiritual Exercises*, a series of devotions and meditations that have been practised by Christians of all shapes and forms since their composition. Leech comments on how the emergence of Ignatian directors re-emphasised the importance of confession, so for example one director, Gabriel Hevenesí, heard 23,000 confessions in a twelve month period<sup>17</sup>. Confession was the key to the exercises, for, having first developed one's attuning to the voice of the Holy Spirit, one immediately engaged in a lengthy process of confession in order to enter into a position of truth in regard to the self. As well as this emphasis on confession, there is the claim that Ignatius represents the high point of "methodical" prayer, but Leech points out that Loyola is simply acting as a collator of previous practices, with "service, reason, love"<sup>18</sup> as the true main emphases of Ignatian Spirituality.

The second and third major figures of the 16<sup>th</sup> century that are pertinent to our discussion are St Teresa of Avila and St John of the Cross (and Leech brackets them together as coming from, and contributing to, the same Carmelite tradition). These two writers develop the themes of Ignatius of the need for confession and entered into detailed meditations on the struggle between sin and the Christian. It is to this area, and its relationship to the pastoral debate over sexuality and the place of ex-gay writers like Mario Bergner, that I now wish to turn.

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<sup>17</sup> Leech, Kenneth; *Soul Friend*; p57 – a slightly incredulous figure, for this breaks down to 63 confessions / day, assuming all 365 days are used!!

<sup>18</sup> Leech, Kenneth; *Soul Friend*; p57

## **Redemptive Suffering and Purgation – The essence of Classic Spirituality**

It may be one of the shortest chapters in Leech's book, but his conclusion, "Towards a prophetic understanding of spiritual direction", captures the heart of the challenge facing pastors today. Leech writes:

"Theology is at the heart of the question of the social relevance of direction. Is this ministry merely concerned with deepening a personal relationship of intimacy with Christ as Saviour? Or is it concerned to deepen perception of the working of God in the structures of society? **Is it concerned to enable individuals to live lives of devotion and piety within the accepted framework of the social order, or does it question the spiritual and moral values of that order?** Adjustment to society, or the Kingdom of God – which is the perspective? **Whether spiritual direction has any social dimension at all is deeply connected with the theological assumptions on which it is based.**"<sup>19</sup>

Here then is the crux of the future for spiritual direction – will it simply permit conformity to the ways of the society in which the one directed finds itself, or will it stand firm in promoting a Christian perspective on issues of spiritual discipline, morality and, in the question at hand here, sexuality? Leech is not averse to

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<sup>19</sup> Leech, Kenneth; *Soul Friend*; p183

addressing the issue of the interconnection of sexuality and sexual awareness with the spiritual life:

“The area of sexuality is crucial to the entire discussion. The spiritual director is concerned with union with God, and this process of union demands a profound degree of self-knowledge and maturity. Because we are sexual beings it involves the acceptance of our sexuality, and the integration of sexuality with the rest of life. The integration is one of the central purposes of religion. Hence the insistence in the spiritual tradition that the guide should be a person experienced in the passions ... One of the most vital tasks, therefore, for contemporary spirituality is to learn from and work through the contemporary insights and understandings of sexuality, and much of the time of any spiritual director may be taken up with this. Nor can such a task be separated from the work of discovering one’s own identity as a sexual being. The spiritual director must be a person who is facing his own sexuality and sexual needs, a person who is on the way towards sexual integrity and wholeness. Spiritual health and sexual health are closely joined, for, as Julian of Norwich wrote, our substance and our sensuality together are in God, and together constitute our soul.”<sup>20</sup>

Now of course, when Leech here writes of sexuality he is not referring to orientation, but rather to the whole understanding of a human of him/herself as

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<sup>20</sup> Leech, Kenneth; *Soul Friend*; p109

being a sexual being. This said, the issue of sexual orientation and one's understanding of one's sexual being are crucial, for sexual expression and the forms of sexual union are deep spiritual signifiers<sup>21</sup>. The key message of course from the "ex-gay" community is that a true understanding of one's sexual identity, not the one arrived at through the impact of a fallen world is crucial for any necessary spiritual growth and discipleship. As Joe Dallas writes:

"You're not called to give up homosexuality just because it's 'bad'; you're invited to a life of wholeness which you can't attain as long as you hold on to anything that's second best. Attaining wholeness, though, means growth. And growth cannot come until those things stifling it are abandoned".<sup>22</sup>

Andy Comiskey agrees:

"As I learned so painfully, overcoming broken sexuality requires giving allegiance to a greater desire, desire for deepening intimacy with the Father through Jesus Christ. The struggler yields the cries and yearnings of his heart to the Father. He finds that his Creator has made a way for him through Jesus. Where sin and brokenness have resulted in sexual problems, Jesus enters in and assumes the struggle himself. All the struggler can do is bow down and worship. The creature desires the

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<sup>21</sup> As Paul argues in Ephesians 5

<sup>22</sup> Dallas, Joe; *Desires in Conflict*; p69

Creator and now healer of his soul more than he does the lesser objects of illicit sexual desire”.<sup>23</sup>

Such language is not alien to one versed in the history of spiritual discipline – it is the language of suffering and engagement, of “purgation” within the darkness that is articulated by the likes of St John of the Cross:

“It now remains to be said that, although this happy night brings darkness to the spirit, it does so only to give it light in everything; and that, although it humbles it and makes it miserable, it does so only to exalt it and to raise it up; and, although it impoverishes it and empties it of all natural affection and attachment, it does so only that it may enable it to stretch forward, divinely, and thus to have fruition and experience of all things, both above and below, yet to preserve its unrestricted liberty of spirit in them all. For just as the elements, in order that they may have a part in all natural entities and compounds, must have no particular colour, odour or taste, so as to be able to combine with all tastes odours and colours, just so must the spirit be simple, pure and detached from all kinds of natural affection, whether actual or habitual, to the end that it may be able freely to share in the breadth of spirit of the Divine Wisdom, wherein, through its purity, it has experience of all the sweetness of all things in a certain pre-eminently excellent way. And without this purgation it will be wholly unable to feel or experience the satisfaction of all this abundance of spiritual sweetness.

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<sup>23</sup> Comiskey, Andrew; *Pursuing Sexual Wholeness*; p72

For one single affection remaining in the spirit, or one particular thing to which, actually or habitually, it clings, suffices to hinder it from feeling or experiencing or communicating the delicacy and intimate sweetness of the spirit of love, which contains within itself all sweetness to a most eminent degree.”<sup>24</sup>

For St John of the Cross, purgation of the senses, the renouncing of the fleshly desires of the heart is the key to truly entering into union with God. This from *The Ascent of Mount Carmel*:

“Wherefore the soul that is enamoured of prelacy, or of any other such office, and longs for liberty of desire, is considered and treated, in the sight of God, not as a son, but as a base slave and captive, since it has not been willing to accept His holy doctrine, wherein He teaches us that whoso would be greater must be less, and whoso would be less must be greater. And therefore such a soul will be unable to attain to that true liberty of spirit which is attained in His Divine union. For slavery can have no part with liberty; and liberty cannot dwell in a heart that is subject to desires, for this is the heart of a slave; but it dwells in the free man, because he has the heart of a son. It was for this cause that Sara bade her husband Abraham cast out the bondwoman and her son, saying that the son of the bondwoman should not be heir with the son of the free woman.

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<sup>24</sup> St John of the Cross; *The Dark Night of the Soul*; 2:9

And all the delights and pleasures of the will in all the things of the world, in comparison with all those delights which are God, are supreme affliction, torment and bitterness. And thus he that sets his heart upon them is considered, in the sight of God, as worthy of supreme affliction, torment and bitterness; and thus he will be unable to attain to the delights of the embrace of union with God, since he is worthy of affliction and bitterness. All the wealth and glory of all creation, in comparison with the wealth which is God, is supreme poverty and wretchedness. Thus the soul that loves and possesses creature wealth is supremely poor and wretched in the sight of God, and for that reason will be unable to attain to that wealth and glory which is the state of transformation in God; for that which is miserable and poor is supremely far removed from that which is supremely rich and glorious.”<sup>25</sup>

And again:

“The soul, then, says that, ‘kindled in love with yearnings,’ it passed through this dark night of sense and came out thence to the union of the Beloved. For, in order to conquer all the desires and to deny itself the pleasures which it has in everything, and for which its love and affection are wont to enkindle the will that it may enjoy them, it would need to experience another and a greater enkindling by an other and a better love, which is that of its Spouse; to the end that, having its pleasure set upon Him and deriving from Him its strength, it should have courage and

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<sup>25</sup> St John of the Cross; *The Ascent of Mount Carmel*; 1:4:6-7

constancy to deny itself all other things with ease. And, in order to conquer the strength of the desires of sense, it would need, not only to have love for its Spouse, but also to be enkindled by love and to have yearnings. For it comes to pass, and so it is, that with such yearnings of desire the sensual nature is moved and attracted toward sensual things, so that, if the spiritual part be not enkindled with other and greater yearnings for that which is spiritual, it will be unable to throw off the yoke of nature or to enter this night of sense, neither will it have courage to remain in darkness as to all things, depriving itself of desire for them all.”<sup>26</sup>

What St John, Theresa, Ignatius before them and thousands after them have discovered is that it is the abandonment of those aspects of oneself that are sinful that is the key to any form of development. It is of course the natural response to encountering God, to realise one’s sinfulness and to die to it. When Ignatius was developing his exercises, the pattern of the opening week or so, of encountering and listening to God and then confessing sin was a keen observation of the natural process of the encounter with God, a pattern found clearest expressed today in the “Evangelical” gospel message, but present in all strands of Christianity.

An curiously, it is the same path to confession that is practised in “ex-gay” courses such as Andy Comiskey’s “Living Waters”. Session 5 of 20 is entitled

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<sup>26</sup> St John of the Cross; *The Ascent of Mount Carmel*; 1:14:2

“The Realignment and Empowering of the Will” and the content reads like a reworked 21<sup>st</sup> century version of St John’s *Dark Night*:

“But first, the Spirit compels us to repent, to realign our will with His. The Father asks us to humble ourselves, and to die to our own wilfulness. We face a lot of resistance to this yielding. When we can honestly answer yes to His call for us to die to the mastery of evil in our lives, then we come face-to-face with our utter need for Him. We are prepared to receive His will. Through the power of the Holy Spirit, His will becomes ours, and enables us to stand upright as His sons and daughters. We are in turn equipped to hear and obey the will of our Father ... Confession and repentance are inseparable, and needfully so. Having agreed with the Father about the specific ways we have failed to hold fast to Christ, we must release the sin forthrightly to Him. Letting go of longstanding patterns of self-indulgence and protection accompanies the naming of these patterns. The clear call to repent reveals the often divided nature of our desires and loyalties, as well as the weakness of our choice-making faculty, or will”.<sup>27</sup>

A similar theme is found in Mario Bergner’s “Redeemed Lives” course:

“The Cross *empowers* us to put the false-self to death.

1. The Bible exhorts us to put the *false-self* to death and to take it off.

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<sup>27</sup> Comiskey, Andrew; *Living Waters Manual*; pp 47-48

- Romans 6:6 – For we know that the old self was crucified with him so that the body of sin might be done away with that we should no longer be slaves to sin.
  - Col 3:9b – You have taken off your old self with its practices
2. The false self avoid reality through defense mechanisms and rigid coping mechanisms.
    - a. Dr James Masterson writes in *The Search for the Real Self* (p23), “The purpose of the false-self is not adaptive but defensive; it protects against painful feelings. In other words, the false-self does not set out to master reality but to avoid painful feelings, a goal it achieves at the cost of mastering reality”.
    - b. We soothe our painful feelings with diseased sexual thoughts, food, gooey dependent relationships, alcohol, drugs, romance novels, etc. etc.
  3. The false-self employs a rigid manner of dealing with problems and challenges.
  4. The false-self relates to others as we would *wish* they would be. We quickly idealise others and then quickly devalue them.
  5. The false-self develops in monologue.
  6. The false-self includes an inflated or a deflated sense of our personal growth and achievements.

- a. We can have an inflated false-self rooted in pride, grandiosity and fantasy.
- b. We can have a deflated false-self rooted in self-hatred and negative attitudes.”<sup>28</sup>

And from the next chapter:

“Suffering in a Christian way means asking the right questions and focusing on Heaven ... We must be willing to suffer, choose to suffer and choose *love* in our suffering; all the while practising the presence of Jesus”.<sup>29</sup>

This idea of “redemptive suffering” or “purgation” as the classical writers called it is a major strand of classic spirituality and spiritual direction, but is noticeable lacking in large amounts of modern “spirituality”. Bergner has noted this is an important article written last year:

“In ages past, spiritual direction was sought as a way to grow the soul in maturity within a specific Christian context--and it worked, too. But is today’s spiritual direction the same as that offered by Julian of Norwich, Walter Hilton, St. Ignatius or St. Francis De Sales? Some is, some is not. Some of today’s leaders of the modern spiritual direction movement are heavily influenced by C.G. Jung, psychological guru of the New Age and disciple of Freud. The result is Christian anthropology is replaced with a

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<sup>28</sup> Bergner, Mario; *Redeemed Lives Leaders’ Manual*; 5:5

<sup>29</sup> Bergner, Mario; *Redeemed Lives Leaders’ Manual*; 6:2

Jungian anthropology that is difficult to detect. This is a serious matter since Jung's anthropology is incompatible with Christian anthropology ...

In Anglicanism, the practice of spiritual direction has included training the conscience and the will to collaborate with the Spirit's work in sanctification. During the seventeenth century, Anglicanism treated Moral Theology and Pastoral Theology as the two sides of the same coin. Training the conscience to ascertain right from wrong is the role of Moral Theology. Such training begins with reading of the Bible and the practice of the confession of our sins. Curing and strengthening the will to choose what is right is the role of Pastoral Theology and Pastoral Care. Only when the conscience and the will are bathed in Holy Scripture and the Holy Spirit do we transition from sinful moral chaos to holy moral order ...

Classic spiritual direction has long held that Christians share a three-fold pattern of spiritual formation. The first is purgation meaning the application of the Cross of Christ to our soul for the cleansing of our sins. The second is illumination meaning discipleship that teaches Christians to walk in the light of special revelation, namely the Bible and Jesus. The third is union meaning a life lived in union with Jesus Christ in such a way as to be in continual prayer or to Practice His Presence. In the Walking the Labyrinth brochure I read, these three stages of purgation, illumination and union were stripped of their outward focus on the Atoning work of Christ and special revelation. Rather, these became a subjective journey into the self. Purgation was equated with moving inward, a time to cast off, release, let

go, discard, divest, unwrap, to quiet and empty the mind. Illumination was equated with centering, a time to be open, emptied, expectant, receptive. Union was equated with moving outward, a time to gain direction, comfort, satisfaction, energy, empowerment. There was no mention of Jesus and no mention of our sin nature ... Christians seeking to grow in Christ through spiritual direction will find a great safeguard against spiritualized narcissism in the practices and liturgies of the historic Church and Her Christ-centered calendar. Additionally, the confession of sins and the ministration of Word and Sacrament are sure ways to continually straighten the incurved bent of our fallen nature and direct our focus outside the self and onto Jesus. These are all God-given means for drinking deeply of the living waters He promises to those who follow Him.”<sup>30</sup>

I couldn't agree more. This led me to ask myself – “does modern pro-gay Christian spirituality have a sense of purgation?” I reviewed two favourably received anthologies of essays on homosexuality to see whether the issue was promoted or even addressed by those supporting some form of homosexual practice. The results are below:

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<sup>30</sup> Bergner, Mario; *Return to Classical Spiritual Direction*;  
[http://www.redeemedlives.org/Resources/Nws\\_atcl/2004/spring04spiritualdirection-3.htm](http://www.redeemedlives.org/Resources/Nws_atcl/2004/spring04spiritualdirection-3.htm)

<b>Essay</b>	<b>Author</b>	<b>Stance</b>	<b>Purgation / Redemptive Suffering</b>
<i>Taken from <b>Homosexuality and Christian Faith</b>, Ed. Walter Wink</i>			
A Belated Justice	Donald W Shriver	Revisionist	No Mention
Thoughts from the Weekend of the Quilt	Carole Shields	Revisionist	No Mention
One Family's Story	Paul Wennes Egerton	Revisionist	No Mention
Homosexuality and the Bible	Walter Wink	Revisionist	No Mention
Biblical Fidelity and Sexual Orientation	Ken Sehested	Revisionist	No Mention
Homosexualities	Morton & Barbara Kelsey	Revisionist	No Mention
Accepting what cannot be changed	David G Myers	Revisionist	No Mention
Homosexuality: A Word Not Written	Maria Harris & Gabriel Moran	Revisionist	No Mention
Exploring the Morality of Homosexuality	Lewis B Smedes	Revisionist	No Mention
Where the Gospel Leads Us	Richard Rohr, OFM	Revisionist	No Mention
Being Christian about Homosexuality	John B Cobb Jr.	Revisionist	No Mention
In God's House there are Many Closets	Peggy Campolo	Revisionist	No Mention
Liberty to the Captives and Good Tidings to the Afflicted	William Sloane Coffin	Revisionist	No Mention – Suffering is raised (p107) and “turning the other cheek”, but this is not purgation
The Challenge of Nonconformity	Elise Boulding	Revisionist	No Mention
Baptism, Bread and Bonds	Igancio Castuera	Revisionist	No Mention
Same-Gender Covenants	M Mahan Siler Jr.	Revisionist	No Mention
<i>Taken from <b>The Way Forward?</b> Ed. Timothy Bradshaw</i>			
Knowing Myself in Christ	Rowan Williams	Mildly Revisionist	No Mention
Homosexuality in the Church	Oliver O'Donovan	Traditional	No Mention
Call to Biblical Values	Gerald Bray	Traditional	Yes – p40
Christian Same-Sex Partnerships	Jeffrey John	Revisionist	Raised but not applied – p46
Travelling Together	Michael Vasey	Revisionist	No Mention
Dancing in the Spirit	Elizabeth Stuart	Revisionist	No Mention
Christ, Creation and Human Sexuality	John Colwell	Traditional	Yes – pp 95-97
Questions of Clarification	Dave Leal	Neutral	Briefly Touched
Divine Order and Sexual Conduct	Simon Vibert	Traditional	Yes – p121
Truth and Love in our Sexual Feelings	Martin Hallett	Traditional	Yes – And also recognises the struggle and possible accommodation with

			fallen self – p132
A Psychiatrist's Perspective	Tom M Brown	Traditional	No Mention
Can Hermeneutics Ease the Deadlock?	Anthony Thiselton	Neutral	No Mention

Some points are worth noting from this brief survey.

1. In his essay in *The Way Forward?* Jeffrey John raises the idea that all enter into some form of redemptive suffering (quoting the St Andrews Statement) but then rejects that there is any form of purgation for those with same-sex attraction since experience tells those with the attraction that it is good.
2. It might be argued that the survey is skewed in that many of the articles are not about the spirituality of people with same-sex attraction. However, this is not the point. The aim of the survey is to see whether the basic traditional concepts of spiritual direction are at all discussed within the dialogue around sexuality. The fact that in practice purgation is discussed far more in the traditional camp than the revisionist camp, **regardless** of the exact specific of the article, is the key observation.
3. That said the exact fallout of articles addressing purgation<sup>31</sup> was:
  - a. Revisionist – 5%
  - b. Neutral – 25%
  - c. Traditional – 66.7%

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<sup>31</sup> Where an article briefly touches on the subject without applying it to sexuality, I have treated it as half an article.

I wondered whether I had just read the wrong books, so I went to an anthology of “christian gay experiences”, the Colin Coward edited *“The Other Way?”*. Once again, in 14 stories of personal experiences, I could not find one single reference to purgation, to any form of classical spiritual discipline in relation to sexuality.

The closest I came to trying to combine purgation with the revisionist gay experience is in the work *Sexuality and the Christian Body*. Here Eugene Rogers argues that:

“I propose that marriage, for the same or opposite sexes, can be a discipline of denial and restraint that liberates the human being for sanctification. The trouble with most conservative arguments is not that in denying same-sex couples the rite of marriage they would deny them true self-satisfaction, although they might. The trouble is that in denying same-sex couples the rite of marriage they would deny them true self-denial.”<sup>32</sup>

The problem with this argument though is that in order for it to work there must be the assumption that a level of purgation and sanctification is available in marriage that is not available outside. If that were not so, then single people would be able to participate in the same experience and sanctification of purgation, and therefore the need for same-sex unions to be blessed is unnecessary. The truth of course is that purgation is an experience encountered by single people and married people and it is not dependent on their status in this regard. Rather it is dependent on an attitude of the heart that recognises sin and

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<sup>32</sup> Rogers, Eugene F; *Sexuality and the Christian Body*; p70

seeks to die to it. The church is not denying any engagement with purgation by refusing to bless same-sex unions. One might even argue it is doctrinally laying the basis **for** a journey into purgation, by declaring clearly in its refusal to bless same-sex unions where one ground for purgation is.

## **Prophetic Soul Friends**

It is my contention that the gay revisionist movement has been in some senses internally betrayed. An initial struggle (to some degrees I would argue rightly) against rampant homophobia in the church, against the experience of inadequate and sometimes derogative psychiatric and medical treatment and social ostracising both within and beyond the congregation, has now moved to a rejection of the very dynamic it first embodied. Far from being a movement that struggles against the dominance of the oppressive forces of society, it has become aligned with the power centres of the culture. Today the revisionist party is at one with the dominant secular viewpoint that homosexuality is not in any sense dissonant to “normal” humanity.

Society holds this view despite the presence of any evidence to support the claim that homosexuality is immutable. For example, Hamer’s claim of a gay gene on Xq28 has been discredited over a decade ago<sup>33</sup> but the claim of proof of natural determination of homosexuality is continually made in the mainstream media and some revisionist groups within the church continue to promote this unscientific assertion. Another example is of some Christian groups producing sensationalist figures of previous persecution like the claim that 250,000 homosexuals died in the Nazi Concentration camps<sup>34</sup> despite the fact that there were less than a fifth of that number of recorded convictions for violation of section 175 during the Nazi

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<sup>33</sup> <http://www.mygenes.co.nz/findings.htm>

<sup>34</sup> <http://www.lgcm.org.uk/documents/PDF/CHLeaflet.pdf>

regime<sup>35</sup>, of which the vast majority served their jail terms in normal prisons<sup>36</sup>. That there was persecution of men practising homosexuality in Nazi Germany is undeniable (and to be condemned unequivocally), but that it existed to the genocidal level some claim is fiction.

What this amounts to is that today a sexual orthodoxy exists in the world that the Western Church dwells and operates in, a sexual orthodoxy that is in opposition to the Biblical vision of husband and wife uniquely signifying Christ and the Church. The promotion of homosexual practice is not in any sense the “chief” of the sexual deviances (the normative position today of sex outside marriage is a far more serious continual denial of the undilutable union of Christ and the Church), but it is one of them. As such, the truly “prophetic” voices in the church and amongst the Soul Friends are those who speak Biblical truth and traditional spiritual practice into the life of the believer.

Leech notes in his conclusion to Soul Friend that:

“Spiritual direction is involved with clarity of perception, with consciousness and awareness, with reality ... To say this however is at once to recognise that frequently spirituality and justice do not walk hand in hand ... ‘A resource against the culture’, ‘a witness against the world’: the work of spiritual direction has brought us to the point of *krisis*, or

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<sup>35</sup> [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Paragraph\\_175](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Paragraph_175)

<sup>36</sup> Up to 15,000 men were taken into “preventative detention” (Source : <http://www.ushmm.org/museum/exhibit/online/hsx/>) and made to wear pink triangles, of whom half died in Concentration and Death Camps. This value for those murdered by the Nazis is 3% of the number claimed by LGCM.

conflict with the world organized apart from God and from spiritual values".<sup>37</sup>

I would argue, from both a comparison of the practices, publications and experience of the likes of Mario Bergner, and from personal experience, that the ex-gay approach to homosexuality stands in the line of classical spiritual direction, in that exhibits and sees fruit from, the one over-arching theme of the classical spirituality writers – the engagement with God, purgation and then sanctification. Further, the absence of these “basics of basics” in the current revisionist spirituality is a further evidence that the perspective taken by many within the church does not cohere with the experience and practice of Christians for the past 2,000 years.

I leave the last words to Kenneth Leech, for I believe they describe the writings of Bergner and others perfectly:

“The spiritual director exists to be a friend of the soul, a guide on the way to the City of God. Her ministry is one of *diakrisis*, discernment of events, and of *liberation*, enabling individuals and communities to move towards freedom, the freedom of the children of God. She is not a leader but a guide, and she points always beyond herself to the Kingdom and the Glory. Through her love, her silence, her prayer, she seeks to be a light for

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<sup>37</sup> Leech, Kenneth; *Soul Friend*; p187

people in their search, but she must always remember the demands of freedom.”<sup>38</sup>

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<sup>38</sup> Leech, Kenneth; *Soul Friend*; p188

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