

The Triumph of Religion, Preceded by Discourse to Catholics

Jacques Lacan (translated by Bruce Fink)

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Bruce Fink has provided us with a first-rate translation of two transcripts¹ which many of us in the English world have not had the luxury of reading from Jacques Lacan. The first transcription, entitled “Discourse to Catholics”, was extracted from a short talk that was “open[ed] to the public” and given on March 9th and 10th of 1960 in Brussels. Among other things, the talk discussed, in a rather curious way, the relevance of the Freudian discovery—the Freudian “Thing” and its relation to the ethics of psychoanalysis—for religious practitioners. Lacan noted, as if to elicit a longing of interest in the topic, that those devoutly religious members of the audience ought to judge the value of his talk by how it strikes their minds at the end, rather than by how it immediately presents itself to their ears. It was as if to displace their conclusions on the topic, so as to keep them in the time for thinking, that he confessed in his final few remarks that it was prudence which kept him from speaking any further on the matter.

The second transcription, entitled “The Triumph of Religion”,² was an interview conducted between some Italian journalists and Jacques Lacan in Rome on October 29th, 1974. The elocution is muddy and the discussants appear to be at odds with one another. One detects a latent hostility within the conversation and perhaps even some sarcasm on the part of Lacan. The point is that the questions were asked with such opacity and with such deep seated conviction (conviction that, for example, answers are necessarily forthcoming) that one ought not reproach Lacan for taking liberties with his responses. As we now know, every question has within itself the seeds of an answer and, therefore, a question about the relationship between psychoanalysis and religion seems to me to be at the heart of the religious question itself. I shall use this as a moment for digression.

The point is that psychoanalysis has always been described in religious terms. It was not two months ago that, in my attempt to discuss a religious theme within Lacan’s written work, I was chastised for having drunk the purple Kool-Aid. Immediately, the claim that psychoanalysis is a religion—and, moreover, that it is, at its essence, something like Scientology (where Lacan has dethroned L. R. Hubbard)—is often raised not in order to discuss the finer points, but rather to repel the teaching before one has

1 With some noted assistance from Jacques-Alain Miller.

2 We are for some reason alerted to the fact that this title was selected by Jacques-Alain Miller. It was, therefore, of no doing by Bruce Fink.

passed through the time required for understanding it. What is more, Lacanian psychoanalysis is often described as a form of mysticism precisely because of its relative obscurity. This, for example, is the common retort to the fact that there is, in all actuality, a discernible system to the teaching that Lacan developed throughout the course of his life. To repeat, the claim has been that Lacanian psychoanalysis is mystical and that, therefore, it is not systematic. My claim—one that has also been made by the likes of Lorenzo Chiesa³—is that Lacanian psychoanalysis is not itself a form of religious mysticism: rather, it is systematic philosophy. To be sure, this is not to suggest that mysticism and religious experience are not central to themes in Lacanian psychoanalysis. The fact is that they are themes that *insist* within the entirety of the teaching. Moreover, this is not to claim that Lacan, in his estimation of philosophy, was somehow a resolute and self-identified philosopher. The point is that there is some aspect of philosophy that is at work within Lacan's lifelong discourse and this aspect is what I would describe—with thanks to Chiesa—as the element of systematization. As we know, systems operate through a series of passes and rejections, and this is equally the case for the teaching of psychoanalysis.

The topic of religion has long been central to psychoanalysis. Freud seemed suspicious of the relationship between obsessive neurosis and religious thinking or behaviour; yet, for all of that, Freud continued to employ religious motifs throughout the entirety of his work. We also know, due to relatively recent discoveries, that Freud participated in a masonic lodge for the greater part of his life. Lacan, even more than Freud, also regularly employed religious doctrine and motifs in his work. No doubt, there was even something inherently mystical about his teaching inasmuch as he encouraged his students, audience members, and analysands alike to seek out their own inner truth. Wouldn't it have come as a surprise to find that the security of such a truth came from something that was inside of them and yet bigger than them, something that, thanks to the name-of-the-Father, allowed them to speak in the first place? The problem is that many of us are not prepared to find our truth. For this reason, psychoanalysis attempts to provide us with the armour required to defend ourselves from retreat against the forces of anxiety.

This is the second form of love that psychoanalysis teaches: if the first love is the transference-love, the love of misrecognition and misunderstanding, then the second form of love is the love (*amour*) of courage as a form of *armour*. Thus, psychoanalysis brings *amour* and *armour* together so that we might have courage (from the Latin, *cor*, which means *heart*). The courage (*cor*) of psychoanalysis is always the courage to go beyond the anxiety of our truth and to thus bring it to bear in the life of the mind. But courage is a difficult thing to teach. This is why systems are developed: because there are a number of passes through which one must wander before one finds oneself with the courage to ask the fundamental question of our relation to truth, of our relation to being. These are the fundamental questions that stand at the centre of psychoanalysis and also of religious

3 Lorenzo Chiesa, *Subjectivity and Otherness: A Philosophical Reading of Lacan*, Cambridge, MA: MIT Press (2007).

experience: “What am I to God?,” and “Am I dead or am I alive?” In each their own way, these two questions define the central truth of two subject-positions that are variously described as hysteria and obsession.

Initially, the book appears to be presented in such a way that initiates can be brought into the inner chamber of the analyst’s discourse with relative ease. In this case, it is not obscurity, but rather clarity which is at fault for the reduction of Lacanian psychoanalysis to mysticism. We must, therefore, heed the warning that Lacan provided about *understanding too soon*. After all, in the final analysis, he did not write to be understood. A certain obscurity, a certain misunderstanding, keeps desire alive and keeps the initiate knocking for more. One keeps trying, one desires more knowledge, and yet, for all of that, one finds that Lacan has protected the secrets of his discourse from a form of trying that does not have the courage to pass through that precious stage of *courage in the face of anxiety*. In his “Discourse to Catholics” (which we are led to believe was delivered to a public audience, many of whom were Jesuits), Lacan claimed that the laws of psychoanalysis must be defended: “May the laws, by sole means of which we can find anew the path of the Thing, be guarded by us. They are the laws of speech by which the Thing is surrounded.”⁴ Recall that the laws of speech (*parole*) are such that they are laws that exist always *within* speech. For example, we know that Lacan often distinguished between *empty speech* and *full speech*. Empty speech, as it goes, is the endless chatter of the analysand, or the silence. Of course, it is only *within* the chatter that the transience of full speech arrives: speech that says *too much*. The laws of speech must therefore be protected because without full speech, that is, without that speech which says more than it meant to say, we might believe ourselves to be masters without an Other—or, if you like, masters without a God.

We must distinguish between mysticism and philosophy, between the systematicity of psychoanalysis and the direct experience of God. The mark of a true philosophy, according to Alain Badiou, is the necessity of the protection of stages.⁵ The philosopher exposes the initiate to *full speech* through the appropriate stages. Philosophy is there where thinking moves through stages or passages, while mysticism is there where one claims a direct experience, without taking the time for understanding. Philosophy, unlike mysticism, can not reduce its movement to the revelation of pure experience without understanding. *Mysticism is philosophy without patience*. In this sense, then, it seems to me, Lacan’s work is perfectly philosophical rather than mystical. While Lacan has drawn from the great mystics in much of his teaching—and, for that matter, so has Alain Badiou—he nonetheless seems to claim that philosophy is not itself a form of mysticism, and neither is it necessarily against mysticism. The point is that mysticism is only for *some*—it is for those who claim a direct and immediate connection to the divine—while philosophy is *for everybody*. Philosophy is a systematic way of bringing

4 Lacan, *The Triumph of Religion*, 51.

5 Alain Badiou, “Mysticism and Philosophy,” (2010, video). Retrieved on December 16th, 2013 from: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=owZstU4aegg>.

one into the world of the divine. In this sense, Lacan's teaching really is for everybody. This means that his teaching requires the initiate to do the work and to thereby appropriately pass through the stages. We know that these stages can be summed up into three: a time for seeing, a time for understanding, and a time for concluding.⁶ Where mysticism attempts to directly pass from the time for seeing to the time for concluding, philosophy always intervenes with a time for understanding.

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6 Jacques Lacan, "Logical Time and the Assertion of Anticipated Certainty," in *Ecrits* (Bruce Fink, Trans.), New York: Norton (2002), pp. 161-75.