Psychoanalysis and Theology: Jacques Lacan and Paul

CHARLES D. HACKETT

ABSTRACT: The nature of humanity—or the human situation—has been an area of thought intensely studied by theologians and philosophers for centuries. In more recent times, however, psychology has made serious advances into this field of inquiry. It has been able to provide insights applicable to previous theological ideas. The author brings to the reader's attention his twofold purpose: to present an interpretation of the human situation as understood by Jacques Lacan—as informed by such forerunners as Sigmund Freud and Martin Heidegger—and expressed by psychoanalytic method. These same ideas are then examined in light of the writings of St. Paul. From a sensitive study of these two thinkers the author has been able to draw numerous correlations pertinent to contemporary studies within religion and psychology.

The purpose of this paper is twofold: to offer an interpretation of Jacques Lacan's understanding of the human situation as it is discovered and addressed through the psychoanalytic process and to suggest a correlation with an interpretation of St. Paul.

From the outset, two methodological presuppositions must be acknowledged. First, Lacan and Paul are both susceptible to multiple interpretations, because, at least in part, neither is a systematic thinker. Aside from Lacan's intentional tendency to opacity, we should remember that both produced their writings in response to situations of controversy. Thus, both have tended to a dialectical development in thought without apparent necessity for consistency. In this, Lacan has had as his model the maître, Freud himself. Paul wrote primarily to address concrete pastoral situations against the background of an immanent eschaton. He did not expect to be read in the light of systematic thought. Consequently, any overall interpretation of either man will be an attempt to delineate the basic, often unarticulated vision of reality latent in each concrete address or specific response in controversy. This presupposition of interpretation holds that it is possible to make some systematic statements about thinkers such as Lacan and Paul, because there is in them a tendency to relate what has gone before to...
what is now encountered, a drive toward the discovery of a unifying vision. In attempting such a systematic lineation, however, the interpreter must guard against simply forcing a satisfying schema on material that seems amenable only because it is confusing.

Our first methodological presupposition entails a second. We assume there may well be an inner consistency in the often disparate writings of a Lacan or a Paul. We assume that this is because such a thinker is assuming that reality is consistent and, therefore, in some terms understandable. Paul and Lacan, then, are both engaged in a hermeneutic enterprise which carries within itself the tendency to include new experiences, new data in terms of the old.

What I take to be the structuralist stance is the further assumption that a hermeneutical system developing in one universe of discourse is, in principle, isomorphic to a hermeneutical system developing in a different universe of discourse. Put more concretely, if we focus on the anthropology of Paul and Lacan, we may find that the hermeneutics of theology and psychoanalysis correlate because the subject of both is the same. To the extent that Paul and Lacan see truth about human beings and articulate that truth within the system of their own hermeneutics, the hermeneutics should be susceptible to some systematization and isomorphic correlation.

The method of correlation in what follows will be, first, to offer an overall interpretation of Lacan's psychoanalytic anthropology, based on several of his basic notions; second, to do the same with Paul; and, third, to suggest some obvious correlations.

Jacques Lacan

Lacan resists systematic schematization because the unconscious cannot be known in any clear or objective manner but is known only partially and indirectly in its manifestations or symptoms. Thus, attempts to understand fully the unconscious in terms of instincts (the later Freud) or through a developmental sequence gone awry (as Lacan understands ego psychology since Hartmann) are themselves manifestations of the tendency to control the unacceptable unconscious through repression. A further barrier to adequate systematization is Lacan's insistence that the unconscious is structured like a language and, correlative to the unconscious can be glimpsed only dialogically in the intersection of the language of the unconscious and the conscious, or of analysand and analyst. Since in either case the interpretation is already marked by the ubiquitous need to repress, to misunderstand the unconscious, such glimpses are always partial and distorted.

Having acknowledged the inadequacy of any theoretical systematization, one nevertheless finds Lacan searching for a way to state, in language or in metaphor, a theory that will give access to the psychoanalytical revelations concerning human beings. Despite his contempt for ego psychology and its tendency to emphasize the developmental history of the human being, Lacan