Quinn FOERCH

Mind, Body, and Spirit: Conceiving the Subject of Faith in a New Psychic Economy

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I am grateful to speak with you all a little bit about psychoanalysis and religion, an idea born out of innumerable prayerful reflections as much as from a litany of generous conversations with Fr. Groff, to whom I owe many, many thanks for this opportunity today! My excitement to discuss these things, although obviously conditioned by my desire to share what I can with members of our congregation, must be tempered a little with a confession: despite the endless stream of instances—which take place in the pew as much as at my desk—where something perks my ears, where there is a click or clarification in the channel between psychoanalysis and religion, I have found in the course of writing this lecture that, although there is so much to say, it can be quite difficult to convey.

In psychoanalytic theory, there is a category that we call the “real.” The “real” does not describe reality, where common sense lives, for instance, but, instead, points broadly to a field that we *cannot* talk about. The real is the impossible, the ineffable, the incapturable. We may point to it in metaphor, where we are consigned to poetry, or we may feel it in an affect we cannot bring words to. We come up against the real in mourning, for instance, but also in the midst of great joy, when our words “fail us.” It is this real that, like a current in the water, charges what we can access—specifically, what language affords us, what we can signify and symbolize—with a kind of gravity, a power and direction. If there is a field that we can point to, a place where we can situate that which religion calls upon, namely, the space where God lives, we might say that it is this real.

As we try to make sense of the place of faith in our world today, I would like you to keep in mind how it is exactly this category, this real, that this modern era seeks to foreclose; with our gadgets, our politics, and the noise of information and opinion that we generally find ourselves awash in. These supports, which give us a kind of feeling of control over the field of reality, are the same that invite a kind of confusion between this real, which exists just beyond our persuasion, and *reality*, which we construct in time, with ideology, society, culture, ethics, etc. To consider the constructions of this reality over time is a good place to start our discussion.

Prior to that which history has called the age of Enlightenment, or even as far forward as the 20th century, the disciplines of medicine and science, and therefore of the mind, were inextricably tethered to the discipline of the soul. For Descartes—inventor of the *cogito*, and to whom we owe our contemporary ideas about consciousness, the brain as the seat of the mind, etc.—as much as Saint Augustine, to offer one’s efforts up to the field of knowledge was to give quite singular thanks to the fortune and provision of divine inspiration: this model of scholarship, which sought God at the ultimate apex of discovery, although the bedrock of our modern, empirical science, has, in the 21st century, largely done away with its religious supports.

Despite this, there are those of us here in this room who understand the inalienable yoke between our experiences, over which we are given the freedom to choose and act, and God's Will.

Even in a world still replete with unimaginable blessings, it is easy to see how those without faith might find it difficult to cultivate, especially when the very structure of one's psychic existence–an existence that informs our desires, passions, and general apprehension of the world–is conceived first in the social field: a field whose fundamental architecture looks very different today from even 60 years ago. As such, it is important not only to make an effort to understand the consequences of this shift, but also to ask questions about its engine: what causes our society to behave differently today than in the 20th century? What does community look like in this new epoch, and what organizes it? What are our wants, our beliefs?

Because we are Christians, I think *this* question remains on our mind and heart more than most—what is the role of *faith* today, and how can we conceive of its place in our modern culture of relentless productivity, worldly aspirations, and unprecedented forms of suffering? This is where psychoanalysis might offer some insight.

It is likely that the very mention of "psychoanalysis" conjures muddled images of Signmund Freud's round spectacles, the analyst's couch, and other tangible and theoretical relics of the past; old therapeutic models we have replaced with miracle drugs, integrative, cognitive behavioral therapies, and ideas about psychic sanitation that include, among other things, a resilience that implies hardening, the fantasy of total self-reliance, and mental wellness supported by comfort. It is not unjust today to scratch our heads a little at the suggestion that psychoanalysis, a discourse that now appears as practical for medicine as the language of Latin might be for neighborhood gossip, has anything to offer in the 21st century.

For those of us who might work in the clinic, it is obvious that the psychic structures of yesteryear have been all but abolished, entombed in the great coffin of anachronisms from the 20th century. Without needing so much as a hint of psychoanalytic knowledge to interpret, I think it is somewhat acceptable to say that we have, in the West, moved from a culture of modest restriction towards a liberal society; not necessarily in the political sense, but in the sense of a liberal helping, abundant, excessive–a society that generally *lifts* repressions, gives outlets to marginalia and provides unprecedented opportunities for self expression.

These were undoubtedly *not* characteristics we would associate with 20th century life, which depended–in the first half anyway–largely on conformity, fixed social and gender roles, and a clear and unwavering division between social classes.

But I am here today to convey the purpose of psychoanalysis as a general technology of interpretation, a tool for the *reading* of social change. To be precise, psychoanalysis is an incredible mechanism for generating a scansion—a kind of metronome beat, a rhythm, punctuation—of cultural mutations, charting them based on trends of discourse—what we can

define as the way that we speak about things, from what position and with what authoritative supports—trends in symptoms, and especially, trends in desire, whether individual or collective.

In this sense, psychoanalysis can tell us a great deal about what we are experiencing today—culturally, politically, and socially—as it reads these patterns, distortions, and fixed points in our discourse, the symptoms and desires we share, and which we inherit from and construct in our society.

Freud himself, considered the founder of the psychoanalytic model, writes extensively on this idea–that, as social creatures, we are materially denatured from the animal kingdom—something separates us from the animal kingdom. If I may somewhat spring ahead of myself here, it is obvious to me in the register of faith that what we inherit from God, what is given to Adam in the Old Testament, and what is renewed for us in the New Testament is the Word itself, a living Word that fundamentally singularizes our purpose from the rest of Creation, and carries within this election an unshakeable responsibility as its stewards. In less transcendent terms, for the sake of practicality, this Word is something that makes the human being unique—something that we share in common.

Although this special quality individuates us from the natural world, it does not isolate us: instead, it implies a certain duty, to this world, and to one another.

If we are thus connected, chained together by this Word, it is the social field that we construct to manage these connections, to substantiate them, and mitigate them through the creation of a kind of relational grammar: rules we accept as participants of a collective. But it is this social, not devised in the real but instead by reality—a construction, not a natural epiphany—is not always perfect.

The function of the psychoanalyst is to listen for the discrepancies between an individual and the social in the clinic, his ear tuned especially towards suffering: the suffering of the person on the couch, certainly, but, bringing our attention to a little biological fact, the ear enjoys a unique status as the only orifice on the human body that cannot, by itself, close.

Thus, the psychoanalyst is also consigned to notice the broader network of social symptoms that this individual suffering indexes. In the clinic, in the city street, on the television screen, or on a Facebook feed: these avenues all voice the malaise of culture, the perils of civil and social life. As a Christian, it is impossible to understand this psychic suffering as abstract from the suffering of the spirit: they are inextricable.

In this way, as a theoretical lever, psychoanalysis is deeply entwined with religion: while this short lecture cannot exhaust the parallels, I ask you to run with me a little, as I try to demonstrate some meaningful inflection points where they cross over.

The membrane between the psyche and the soul is not a fixed and rigid barrier. In fact, this barrier is entirely a manifestation of language: anyone who has dabbled in philosophy will

encounter Plato's questions about the problem between "body and soul." Today, with no small help from our modern Scientific notion of consciousness, which makes distant the natural sciences of the Greeks, our translations address this as "the *mind*-body problem." I believe that, if we are to try and do something here today, it is, at the very least, to gesture to the necessity of restoring harmony to these dimensions, an unbreakable knot between mind, body, and soul.

In order to put forward a case for the utility of seeing these aspects of experience in concert, I would like to address what Dr. Charles Melman, founder of the *Association lacanienne Internationale*, a school of psychoanalysis to which I belong, offers in terms of a reading of the social today. I must be careful to explain, however, that the purpose of the psychoanalytic discourse is quite singularly as an irritation: something that dislodges elements swept under the rug, sublimated quietly into the unconscious, and which forces us to confront the rejected, foreclosed, repressed, or artificially hidden. In this way, and by virtue of texture alone, we might begin to see the semblance between the discourse of psychoanalysis and the core of our faith as Christians: a kind of love and attentiveness to suffering that does not forget the often uncomfortable dimension of the truth.

In this way, I want to excavate two phrases from Scripture to keep in mind, especially as we begin to talk about psychoanalysis and the social: the first, from Matthew, Matthew 10:34: "I have not come to bring peace, but a sword," something that disrupts the order of the world, something with a cleaving value. From the Latin, there is a word we might meaningfully hear this notion reverberate—*ek-sistence*, to *ek*-sist, set apart from, divide.

Existence depends on the function of *excision*, a foundational cut and separation.
But this division has a different texture for a first century audience than it would have today, especially applied to the family system. Considering the primacy that the family enjoys in the first century, not just as a measure of symbolic inheritance but as constitutive of both identity and oftentimes purpose in reality, what Christ offers in this extract from Matthew is, no doubt, intended to shock, to irritate just a little—Matthew 10:36: "a person's enemies will be those of his own household."

The household addressed here has a value that, with our modern social supports and globalized connectivity, we are temporally and contextually removed from: although the absolute importance of the family makes itself known to us in childhood at the level of survival, in the first century, this extends well beyond the dimension of initial caretaking: it is a binding agent, something that implies roots, symbolically and in reality, spatially, that cannot be dissolved. In this context, the household *is* survival itself, and also the limits of experience. Survival and limit of the bloodline as much as survival and limit of the everyday: economically, socially, legally, and in terms of labor.

In some ways, it remains so today: the family represents the basic unit, the atomic nucleus of all supports for existence in the field of reality.

As it was then and is now, for Christ to assert His function on earth as one which challenges the very foundations of the reality to which we are accustomed is significant to keep in mind. No matter if we are talking about first century or 21st: there is, universally offered by this "sword," an inversion of our instinct at stake, something in the order of the unexpected, something intended to, quite literally, flip our world upside down.

The second piece of Scripture I would like to isolate comes from the Revelation—I promise that I am not here trying to set a particularly dour tone!—about what characterizes love. Revelation 3:19: "those I love, I rebuke and discipline." I think it is not difficult to assert that this idea in particular is one at-odds with the discourse surrounding love today. Is love today not generally conceived of–not necessarily by Christians, but by the world of social media and self-help literature–in terms of unconditional embrace? In terms that situate it firmly in the register of perfect, unchallenging acceptance? Or, conversely, of boundaries we develop, distances we carefully maintain in order to avoid confrontation at all cost? Sometimes forgoing love, keeping things surface, entirely as a means to "preserve *our* peace?"

The questions certainly must provoke at least some of us to recall something we learned in adolescence—what it means to be a good friend. A good friend sees an individual that they care for, maybe playing with fire, maybe going down the wrong path, drugs, alcohol, recklessness, and addresses them—this is a kind of love we tend to preserve in adulthood as a last resort, the intercession we offer to someone at "rock bottom;" in the context of the clinic of addiction, we might approach this moment with what we call an intervention. A moment where we see that an individual can no longer control themselves.

But, Biblically speaking, intervention does not depend on bottoming out, on entirely losing one's control; Revelation 2:19: "I know your works, your love, faith, and service and patient endurance, and that your latter works exceed the first." I would say this indicates pretty decent standing, a positive exercise of self control! Revelation 2:20: "But," it is written, "I have this against you…"

To our earthly sensibilities, this seems a little harsh! If there is no one perfect but Christ, why does it seem, in this moment in the Revelation, that we are held to a standard of this perfection? Why is it that, here, despite all these wonderful acknowledgements about our love, work, service, and patience, why is there still something outstanding? Here, in this frustration, the frustration of not quite reaching an aim, we arrive at somewhere fertile.

It is precisely this instance, this missing piece that I would like to pronounce, establishing a waypoint for our discussion. In psychoanalysis, we privilege this missing piece as that which founds us as a psychic subject in terms of desire, which constitutes our embodiment as a being animated towards action. As a builder of some scaffolding over which to cover the hole.

But the missing element is exactly the element which society, its discourse, objects, and its provisions, would like to obliterate today. The cause of an appetite we have grown so accustomed to satiating that we would prefer to do away with it entirely. We are, at this nexus,

firmly on the terrain of Dr. Melman's new psychic economy, which I can only address through the portal offered by this hole, this absent piece.

The theory of psychoanalysis conceives of the subject entirely in terms of desire—this is what sets it apart from modern psychotherapies: while our cognitive behavioral models, our quantitative, client-clinician-scientist triumvirate implores that the measure of therapeutic success can only be asserted in the empirical result, the psychoanalytic idea of successful treatment is, in so many words, *measured by the extent to which the subject assumes responsibility for himself*: for his desires, and for his symptom. It is less a discipline designed to strengthen the ego and produce independence than it is to *relativize* aspects of experience that appear to a subject as fixed, arresting, preventative. The symptom is for the subject what the glass box is for the mime.

In other words, the aim of the psychoanalytic cure, if we can appreciate it in technical terms, is one that hopes to anchor the subjects existence in something other than the symptom. I recognize that this all seems a little opaque, so there are a few questions I would like to try to get ahead of.

To avoid pontification, we must describe things outside of definition, and, instead, situate them in their utility. If desire is so important, what does it do, and, more importantly, how does it work?

Well, desire is the fundamental tension that compels us to act. We can think of it in terms of a metaphor, borrowed from something more primitive, a drive; generally speaking, the drive of hunger suggests that we should eat. If we are only a little hungry, if it is a passing thought, we might walk ourselves to the fridge, open the door, and, realizing that the value of what we *have* to eat is lower than the threshold of hunger, we might shut the door and return to doing whatever it is that occupied us before.

That said, as this hunger goes unattended to, we might find ourselves getting in the car with a little more urgency, abandoning our occupations, resorting to negotiating with the nearest drive-thru menu, despite whatever dietary intentions we may wish to uphold…

Suffice to say that, although hunger is more physiological than psychical, desire works in much the same way: desire is a tension that seeks an object—person, place, or thing—to attempt resolution.

To wax a bit poetic, but with an aim towards illustration, desire is generally known to us as the substance of earthly love: something we feel, something that animates us, but, importantly, *it makes fools of us all*. I hope we have all done something foolish for love—not only does this presentation depend on you knowing what I mean by this, but this is the great lynchpin of literature and art! A love so blinding that you are made a fool. Sometimes, and for the right person, even with full knowledge and happily so.

Thus, this is desire in the context of psychoanalysis. It is founded around a lack. Something is missing and we are off to the races in looking for it. So we look, again and again, in people, places, ideas, and things. Anything that can be symbolized, anything we can talk about, which therefore can be captured in a signifier, a word, this can become an object of desire.

For those of you who have seen the film *Citizen Kane*—which, by the way, is almost universally ranked as the greatest film of all time, totally a worthwhile watch—you can likely immediately recognize the field day that so-called "psychoanalytic theorists" in the academy have with this movie and the structure of desire.

Without spoiling anything, it is fundamentally a film about a man—based on William Randolph Hearst, newspaper tycoon and the richest man of yesteryear, a Jeff Bezos or Elon Musk—who has acquired everything material that the world can offer, but, in his final moments of life, calls out for one thing, calls out for it by name—*Rosebud*. I won't spoil the film, but suffice to say that this object is monetarily valueless: it is entirely charged with a *symbolic* value, a subjective value, an address by name that renders it more irreplaceable than the wealth of the world.

A final point about desire, before we launch ourselves away from theoretical terrain. Desire is grounded in the exogenous. In other words, desire can only be founded on something other than what it has access to. As such, desire depends on this lack in a particular way: by exclusion, and, paradoxically, through the *prohibition* elemental to informing the limits that set certain objects outside the attainable.

This idea of *limit* is the key here, this prohibition, in terms of desire. If you had any preconceptions of psychoanalysis beyond the picture of Freud's face and the stuffy analyst's couch, it is probably a knowledge of the Oedipus complex as its major intellectual contribution. What the Oedipus complex seeks to describe is not really a specific object of the infant's desire, the mother, but, instead, the particular formation of this desire under the edifice of prohibition.

The "no" of the father, who says "you cannot have this, find something else," consecrates the exclusion as an invitation: the forbidden succinctly becomes what is lost, denied, or otherwise deprived in the subject. It is this "no" that sets up the distance between you and what you want, and that which, by virtue of the technology of the signifier, of the symbolic, you will seek again and again, but which will always escape your grasp.

So, let us return to faith here, to the pieces of Scripture which we sought to foreground this discussion today, particularly the one from Matthew: "not peace, but a sword."

If any of you were lucky enough to catch Fr. Groff's sermon a few months ago about the story of Jesus and legion—the man who lived among the tombs in perpetual agony, who cut himself with stones and cried out night and day, who Jesus drove many demons out of, an uncountable, ambiguous "legion" into a herd of pigs, driven off of a cliff—you will recall the very surprising reaction of the townspeople to having this man cured: they did not celebrate with fattened calf, there was no record of a mass conversion, a tremendous outpouring of faith. Instead, the

townspeople drove Jesus away, “pleaded with him” in “fear,” it is written, to leave. Why? Why would this be?

Because, just as in the subject itself, in the social, desire is founded on prohibition, on an exclusion, a point of tension. This exclusion orients us to an exterior, to something of an anchor for our common experience, something we can point to together that we magnetize as the locus of our ailments. A “them” in contrast to our “us” which gives us the limits of our community. Imagine the conversations in the marketplace of this first-century town, a town that this man disrupts; you’re buying fruit and you approach a vendor, but there is a quiet screaming in the background, a nagging droning on: “if only we could get rid of him…” or, “did you get any rest last night? That man in the tombs was driving me nuts!”

Maybe a bit comical, but don’t you see how this irritation, this inexhaustible nuisance actually facilitates something in the world? It’s something we can unite against, something that, if absent, we might not know what common ground to stand on ideologically, even in simple conversation! Think of how politics in our country plays a similar role today—we each belong to our camp, while the “other” side gives us something to talk about!

Since this lecture is really only intended to be cursory, I won’t belabor the point—it is obvious that the function of Christ, Christ’s love which we are led to exemplify by faith, *should* feel a little at-odds with the love offered by the world. If ours is a world of desire, and desire is founded on lack, then this story about legion—which we might hear better as *lesion*, something cut off, external—actually demonstrates this disparity: Christ’s love, which promises wholeness, is a love that does not agitate desire, does not stoke it, but satisfies it. A nourishing love, a complete love. A love from the real, not from reality.

The townspeople’s reaction reminds us that this kind of love ought to disturb our earthly sensibilities.

Christ’s sacrifice on the cross epitomizes the rupturing character of this love, it’s unexpected posture that makes it a love in opposition to our human nature, and to the world—I think it is hard for us today to conceive of exactly what crucifixion signified in the first century. In fact, as a Roman citizen, you were legally protected from crucifixion. This is the most humiliating, low-down, degrading death sentence. Just by virtue of *citizenship*, you were protected from this kind of punishment. And Christ, the Most High, offers himself willingly to an instance of the world’s most low, most humiliating, ultimate condemnation devised by the city, by society.

We see here in full a representation of the logic that does not come to bring “peace, but a sword,” a “love” that “rebukes and disciplines.” Something that offers a surprising and dislocating alternative to the tension of desire in the completeness and fullness of its transcendent perfection.

So… what is going on in our society today that makes this love not more difficult to access than it was in the past, but organized differently?

Well, something unexpected has happened since the social and scientific revolution of the mid-20th century. Something which has reorganized the communal bond, not around our shared concession to lack, not even around common desire, but, instead, around the limitless enjoyment provided by the attainable, digestible, commercial object. An object that is the engine of our financial economy as much as our psychic economy. An object that can be purchased, exhausted, discarded, and sought again. If you have followed thus far, I am here to turn us around a little: the society I describe as the one founded on the limit and the prohibition, on common repression that organizes our experience of the social bond is a society we moved on from long ago. And what is offered instead?

Today, the throne of facticity, the seat of the world's truth and therefore of all knowledge in the field of representations, is not where we find reference to God. Instead, the masthead of Science has been propped up, a discourse that confuses reality as we know it with the ultimate truth: a so-called "objective" truth, which would have discarded with subjectivity in order to assert its axioms with universal assent. An arrogant master who, guaranteeing a world without limits, an experience of life mediated not by delayed gratification and acceptance of the notion that there exists a dimension of the forbidden, but instead by instantaneity and the promise of a dangerous and illusory, manmade utopia, has come to occupy this throne.

Where our society once gazed heavenward in reverence to the awesome power of Creation, we now imagine the planets where, after divesting this world of all its resources, we will find refuge through interstellar colonization, if for nothing else than to repeat the pillage. These aims epitomize their contingency, which is also their failure: the wholeness that this kind of discourse offers is one of perpetual deference, from object to object to object. This is a Western reality of endless choices, where the animating tension of desire is extinguished by technological prosthetics that, despite their many apparent benefits, are demonstrably subversive.

The smart phone and computer have broadened the possibilities for communication, but, in tandem, it has also manufactured a paradoxical threshold, cultivating a generation of individuals who enjoy less time with others in the real world.

We have made incredible leaps in medicine, but some of these have created an attitude that we are due a miracle pill, a miracle cure, which strips us of the need to pursue healthy choices. On the very cutting edge of things, many people, disenfranchised with the friction we all encounter in the natural course of social relations, have even turned to artificial intelligence: sometimes as a therapist, sometimes as a friend, and even sometimes as an imaginary, but very serious, life partner.

Drugs for boredom, pain, and, most significantly, the discomforts of desire itself—whether atypical, recreational, or fully legitimized by the institutions charged with ethical medical care—saturate our world today. From marijuana to a limitless trove of YouTube videos, pornography and video games, there is always something that the world has to offer to quench

our thirst for the transcendent, to annul the natural yearning of the soul, to offer a manmade wholeness that keeps our appetites for true wholeness at bay.

I would like to conclude with one final point from psychoanalysis, despite feeling as though I have only just begun to address things, in order to depict something practical about faith from a structural point of view. There is a phenomenal formalization from psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan, who explains that “when society is real, acts are symbolic, and when society becomes symbolic, acts become real.” Without plumbing the depths of what this formalization offers theoretically, I think we can all hear something in this schema at the level of history, if framed a bit differently; when society is organized with a clear authority, deriving its power from an ultimate source beyond just the will of each individual—the notion that we see ourselves belonging to, for instance, a culture, a community, a state, nation with a collective set of values—our symbolic actions—peaceful protests, petitions, and debates—have a meaningful force in the production of change. This is the model upon which politics itself functions—a society we expect speech, diplomacy, and civil negotiation to effect.

But when the vertical authority falls away in the social, and is left instead to be deferred horizontally within a society of “individuals” with an absolute will—in other words, when it becomes impossible to challenge the decisions and desires of others from any transcendent common ground, when you can no longer be “a good friend” without the possibility of committing a social injustice—these symbolic acts no longer have much power.

This is not a collective enterprise, a society we share by virtue of something broad like citizenship, but, instead, a disconnected society of individuals, organized by hobbies, almost tribal political camps, and the kind of enjoyment they share broadly. In this model, which is altogether too present today, violence, assassinations, school shootings, and general delinquency pervade, most of the time because these things feel, to some, like the only acts that could provoke change in a society that can no longer hear!

Although this formula might seem quite depressing, I argue that it ought to be a hearth for our hope. After all, it is *we* who understand the mighty power of the Word, the Word who came down from Heaven to become man in the flesh. It is we who know the power of the symbolic in prayer. It is we who struggle, day by day, to love in the face of opposition, violence, sorrow, and our own human nature in an emulation of Christ’s unexpected, perfect love.

We who, through these means and more, have the opportunity to inherit the “sword” that Christ brings to the fantasies of this world: a sword that disrupts the artificial peace of reality, a sword that dispels illusion and, in its cleaving, creates a fissure only to be resolved in the fullness of God’s love. Through *our* discipline, our religion, we embody a love that sees the good of someone’s “works and faith,” not forgetting the dimension of truth where no things remain hidden, and where we always see room for improvement.

So, what does psychoanalysis help us to understand about the place of faith today? Well, I hate to disappoint, but, it reveals nothing new: that faith, faith in Christ, is now what it always has been—the *ultimate* rebellion against the illusory promises of this world.