

Ancient Poem, Ancient Practice The Song of Songs in Spiritual Direction

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Abstract

The Song of Songs, an ancient poem, is often referred to as 'the Holy of Holies of Scripture' or the text of all texts that speaks of divine-human love. Spiritual direction, an ancient practice, has been described as 'the science of all sciences and the art of all arts', 'the greatest of all sciences', and the 'greatest of the arts'. Yet, within the plethora of classical and contemporary works on the ancient poem and the ancient practice, very little research has been done on the Song of Songs in spiritual direction. The resonance between the poetics of the Song of Songs and the practice of spiritual direction is profound given the poem's love lyrics, human dynamics, and mystical aesthetic. This article draws on this resonance in elucidating the transformation of the human beloved; the purpose is to highlight the validity and feasibility of the Song of Songs as biblical-poetic paradigm for contemporary spiritual direction.

Introduction

The Song of Songs has for millennia been regarded as the core and compendium of the Scriptures. Though a modest 117 verses, the Song 'resonates and reverberates throughout Jewish and Christian culture as though it were understood to embody the central truth and mystery of the human condition' (Scheper 1992:315). Influenced by Rabbi Akiba's coinage of the Song of Songs as 'the Holy of Holies' of all Scripture, in the second century A.D., the first biblical commentary ever written is *On the Song of Songs* by the third-century Christian, Origen (Davis 2001:66). Origen's commentary is also acclaimed 'the

first great work of Christian mysticism' (Johnston 1995:17, citing Lawson 1957:265). For ancient interpreters the Song of Songs (or Canticle of Canticles) was reckoned among the deepest and most difficult texts in the Bible (Norris 2003:xvii), so it stands to reason that contemporary scholars esteem the Song of Songs as biblical literature with a hermeneutical challenge par excellence (LaCocque 1998:38). The least 'biblical' book in the Bible is, ironically, 'profoundly revelatory'; it is 'in a sense, the most biblical of books' as 'the poet is throughout in conversation with other biblical writers' (Davis 2000:231).

For spiritual direction purposes, I have identified four questions in exploring the Song of Songs as a biblical-poetic paradigm for spiritual direction: (1) What is the Canticle's poetic vocation and enduring enigma? (2) How does the Canticle inform contemporary spiritual direction? (3) How can the Canticle be transposed for twenty-first century spiritual praxis? and (4) Is the Canticle 'religious enough' to serve as poetic enrichment and spiritual nourishment? A brief discussion on each of these questions elucidates the Song's poetics of love and spiritual direction's praxis of love, a poetics-praxis amalgam which is based on a transformative reading of the Song of Songs and an experiential approach in spiritual direction.

The Canticle's Poetic Vocation and Enduring Enigma

Poetics – or a 'poetic orientation' – is the key to a transformative approach to the Song of Songs, as the bible's most unconventional book 'raids the inarticulate' and follows the 'wisdom of a different genre' (Burrows 2005a:341; 2005:208). In the present context, a poetic orientation raids the archives of an ancient wisdom genre for a fresh understanding of an ancient poem and an ancient practice. Poetics is simply defined then as 'new contemplation of old facts' and the central aim of poetics is 'breeding a new conviction rather than settling a controversy'. Drawing on the contribution of contemporary poetics, the Canticle's poetic vocation is stated as twofold: first, the Song of Songs serves as a poetic prism of love which refracts multivalent meanings of love, and therefore calls for multiple readings of its leitmotif of love; and, second, it is a poetic phenomenon of love in search of epiphany in human lives and in every generation, with a concomitant transformation across time.

The poetic prism refracts an interesting spectrum of light on the Song's leitmotif of love, giving rise to three interfacing approaches, namely: the metaphorical; the mythological; and the mystical. Interpreting

this spectrum invariably leads to an intertextual journey on both sides of the Song. Within the Song's luxuriant 'Garden of Metaphor' (Alter 1985), the metaphor that most aptly depicts the transformation of the human beloved is the *vineyard*, which is a figurative term for the beloved herself (Murphy 1990:78), her body (LaCocque 1998:185), and female sexuality (Falk 1990:155). The vineyard is deeply rooted in the Judeo-Christian tradition. As metaphor in the Song of Songs, it is a locus of intimate loving (*eros*); in relation to the YHWH-Israel relation in Isaiah's two songs of the vineyard (Isa 5:1-7; 27:2-6), it is a locus of divine-human intimacy (*mythos*); and, in Jn 15:1-17, the vine is an apt symbol for the mystery that lies hidden in the interstices between what is revealed and concealed (*mustikos*), and for Jesus' archetypal rhythm of 'going out yet remaining in' (Smith 1987:54).

The Canticle's enduring enigma is attributed to its 'pure signification', or as 'pure lyric without a didactic spelling out of historical referents' (Fisch [1988]/1990:86). The poem is also constructed with a sense of engaging presence and perpetual immediacy, and is intended to achieve maximal reverberation and timeless appeal. It remains open-ended, as closure would mean 'the end of desiring, the silence of the text, the death of love' (Exum 2005:85,79). The Canticle's poetic genius evokes a search for love, God, and self which, in the language of love mysticism, is 'a search for the Beloved', or for God the divine lover (Ruffing 2000). The Song of Songs is essentially a musical or lyrical text - the 'love lyrics' of the Bible (Falk 1990). The Canticle *performs* as a mystical text (McIntosh 1998:130-146) when the spiritual sense is read *off* the literal (Turner 1995:133), without denying the sexual interpretation. The Song of Songs provides *in nuce* the lyrics, erotics, poetics, and aesthetics of love which is found nowhere else in Scripture. 'This is why the language of the Song of Songs turns out to be irreplaceable. Without it, mystical experience would remain mute (Ricoeur 1998:284). Conversely, without a mystical hermeneutic the mystical music of the Song remains mute. A mystical hermeneutic of scripture 'is one in which a direct experience of God, or Ultimate Reality, or the One is the end result' (Kourie 1998:8). A direct experience of God is a transforming encounter, which is the reason that '[t]he transformative power of scripture is central in mystical interpretation' (1998:9). In the context of the Song, mystical experience refers to a 'mutual possession of the lovers' (Ricoeur 1998:292), the reprise being mutuality and intimacy with God, the inexpressible Mystery and unnamed Source of love in the Song of Songs. The poem's transformative aptitude is attributed to a phenomenon of inner transformation (Matter 1990:8), which is teased out with dramatic

tensions and incremental movements, a 'sustained lyric force, unified and powered' by an intense quality of yearning, and moving toward some culmination; hence Fisch's notion of 'the poem itself seeking its final meaning, its epiphany' ([1988]/1990:86). The Song's search culminates in the Incarnation of Christ, in divine-human Epiphany par excellence. Jesus the Beloved – the archetype for a *Person* fully loved, fully human, and fully alive in God – brings to the human community and all creation the embodiment of divine *eros* and the overflow of Trinitarian *ekstasis* (McIntosh 1998:49).

The Canticle Informs Contemporary Spiritual Direction

The Value of Biblical Research

Jesus is the 'first and foremost Christian spiritual guide' (Yungblut 1995:131); thus, the paradigm and exemplar for Christian spiritual direction. As a practice or tradition, spiritual direction dates back to the fourth century Egyptian desert father, Anthony the Great. The ancient practice is essentially prayerful, pastoral and experiential. Given the revival of spiritual direction toward the end of the twentieth century (Tam 2007:1-2), and the subsequent proliferation of spiritual direction writings, the dearth in biblical literature in spiritual direction is significant. Contemporary spiritual direction 'text books' deal mainly with the 'use' of Scripture in the process of direction; however, the topic of 'Scripture and spiritual direction' and the biblical rationale for the ministry have scarcely been addressed (Tam 2007:69). What is the value of biblical research for a prayerful and pastoral practice which focuses primarily on human experience and divine-human encounter?

Biblical research substantiates the core values of the practice; it identifies the principal motif in the spiritual journey and clarifies the *raison-d'être* for Christian spiritual direction. A core value derived from the Song of Songs is captured as follows: 'Love is the core of revelation; all the rest is commentary' (LaCocque 1998:38). Love as a core value augments the ministry of spiritual direction in attending to people of different ethnic, cultural and religious backgrounds without losing its distinctiveness. With regard to spiritual direction at the ecumenical edge, Reiser asserts that contemporary theology has to be done 'comparatively', that is, 'with one eye on what others have to share with us about their experience of God'. He adds that 'we shall be in a position to draw fruit from other religious traditions in proportion to how much we have appropriated our own Christian faith' (2004:10-11). In the context of East-West dialogue in Japan, Johnston, a Jesuit, asserts that 'a mystical theology based on the Bible

will be specifically Christian. As such, it will be the basis for dialogue with the mysticism of non-Christian religions' ([1978]/1997:51). 'Authentic Christian mysticism is based on love', which suggests that 'mysticism that is not rooted and grounded in love cannot be called Christian' (Johnston 1995:72, 61). The tradition of love mysticism is characterized by 'the *personal*, namely, Christ, who is the wisdom of God' (1995:155-172). It follows that the deep resonance between the Song of Songs and spiritual direction is 'the *human soul*, not dualistically separated from the body, but the true self, the core and centre of the person, the innermost being that longs for God' (1995:208).

A specifically Christian focus brings a coherent and specific voice to the vast discourse on spirituality that is swirling around us (Schneiders 2005:17). This impacts on Christian spiritual direction as the idea of a spiritual guide is not distinctively Christian. Various forms of spiritual and moral guidance were practiced in primitive cultures and ancient religions for the purpose of enlightenment, virtue, wisdom, meditation and healing; for example, in shamanism, Buddhism, Hinduism, Judaism and the classical philosophical schools (Leech 1980:39-41). Love mysticism is also not unique to Christianity (Sufism, as a case in point); however, 'it is probably more organically central to classic Christian theory and devotional practice than to any other religious tradition' (Kelsey 1983:21). More intensive biblical research on the topic of 'The Song of Songs/Spiritual Direction/Christian Mysticism' would help to clarify and consolidate the ministry of spiritual direction within the field of the helping professions, the academic discipline of spirituality, and interfaith and intercultural conversation.

A Biblical Paradigm for Christian Spiritual Direction

Research in the Song of Songs evokes several important questions with regard to a biblical paradigm for the practice of spiritual direction. First, the pastoral, prayerful and experiential practice places much emphasis on human experience, the human search, and divine-human encounter (Barry & Connolly 1983; Barry 2004). It is therefore helpful to identify, from Scripture, an archetypal seeker in the human search for love, God, and self. Second, transformation is integral to the process of discovery and recovery, and of psycho-spiritual healing, wholeness, and integration (May [1982]/1992; Tam 2007); however, the transformative journey in love, toward union with God and life-integration, is hardly engaged from a biblical rationale. The beloved's transformative journey in the Song of Songs provides common

Christian ground for spiritual accompaniment; it serves as inspiration to contemporary seekers, a meeting point among soul friends seeking the Beloved, and a 'non-religious' talking point with pilgrims of other faiths. Third, if personal story is to connect with *the Story* and with the Christian story (Guenther 1992; Chan 1998), a biblical text would be helpful which offers an experiential framework as well as broad symbolic scope – a narrative which speaks to the contemporary need for a symbolic life (Leech 1980:108 citing Jung) as well as 'a mythology or Big Story through which we discover the spiritual meaning of our individual lives' (Young-Eisendrath 1999:157). Fourth, the Song of Songs is cited in relation to the topics of *eros*, desire, sexuality, love mysticism, and intimacy with God (Ruffing 2000); further research is needed with regard to ways in which the Song of Songs inspires the search for the one my heart loves and informs the principles, process, and praxis of love in spiritual direction. Fifth, if the human yearning for love is the song of the soul (Tam 2007:186, citing Satir), a yearning which is intensified 'by the deprivation of love in the family of origin', spiritual direction would be enhanced by a biblical voice who sings in superlative key of that ageless yearning. Sixth, no manual or handbook exists for the diverse practice of spiritual direction – and rightly so. Where the resonance between the ancient poem and ancient practice is adequately identified and experientially verified, the Song of Songs would serve as a *canticle* of spiritual direction; *canticle* referring to contemplation of the mystery of divine love and a celebration of human transformation in love.

The Song of Songs as a Poetic Invitation to Divine-Human Intimacy

The 'non-religious', yet deeply theological, Song of Songs is invitational. It is unique among biblical texts because it is devoid of explicit religious, moral or ethical instruction. The Song is distinguished by its poetic invitation to 'Love me!' – an invitation which 'springs from the bond between God and the individual soul' (Ricoeur 1995:319). 'Love me!' is more of a subtle and tender invitation than a strong imperative, particularly when understood within the framework of 'the poetics of love' (1995:324) and in relation to *gift*. The divine economy of gift and the 'giftlike character' of biblical symbols effect a movement away from 'self interest' toward 'a welcoming attitude toward the other' (1995:299-300). When the invitation to 'Love me!' is linked with 'the song of praise' (1995:320), loving God is a surpassing joy - not a duty.

'Love me!' is a mystico-poetic invitation which extends beyond the boundaries of the prescriptive, propositional, and pragmatic.

Furthermore, these two monosyllabic words are multiplex and polysemantic; they serve as magnets, drawing people to *experience* the God of love. The poem demonstrates this through varying degrees of intimacy, as follows: it retains the primordial language of love (*eros*, yearning for the one my heart loves); sustains the yearning for a transcendent love (*mythos*, seeking the one my heart loves); maintains the mystique of divine-human love (*mustikos*, finding that I am desired, I am my lover's and my lover is mine), and contains the conditions for the continuing-incarnation of love in the world (*kosmos*, birthing of who I am in God and living generatively in the community and in God's world). These four unique components suggest a multifaceted listening approach in spiritual direction, namely: on the levels of *eros* (emotions, the imagination, the ego, and the body); *mythos* (personal narrative, collective history, and socio-religious-cultural traditions); *mustikos* (poetic intercourse and *second-naivete* discourse); and *kosmos* (a transformed self uniquely embodied in the world).

The Song's poetic invitation to love does not avoid tensions and struggle. The interplay of paradox is a dynamic principle and core rhythm of the Song, which Turner suggests is 'the tension of *eros* itself' – and is essentially transformative (1995a:85). The poem's yin-yang tensions, yearning for union and epiphany, and the alternation of presence and absence are intense and real. This phenomenology of dark and light, and the transformative dynamics of presence/approach (*kataphasis*) and absence/withdrawal (*apophasis*) in love relationships are fundamental to spiritual maturation. The two 'nights' of the Song activate the personal unconscious. Through struggle and loss, we learn to confront our shadow, befriend the dark side of ourselves, and reconnect with the collective unconscious (Johnson 1991). The Song of Songs as 'the paradigm of paradigms' informs our transformative journey in God because it reflects the paradoxes of life – 'a book that, paradigmatically, demonstrates the paradigmatic nature of paradigm' (Wolfson 2006:349).

Transformation in Love as Raison-D'être for Spiritual Direction

A transformative approach to the Song of Songs identifies several experiential aspects which inform spiritual praxis, namely: the human subject (locus); human yearning (focus); the human search (journey); the dynamics of human transformation and spiritual maturation (process); the aspects of life-integration and union with God (purpose); and a life oriented toward epiphany (direction). Treating the human beloved as archetypal seeker, and integrating these various aspects as a composite journey, *transformation in love* is suggested as

principal motif in the Song of Songs and as *raison-d'être* for Christian spiritual direction. The term is attributed to John of the Cross, a recurrent theme in his works (Kavanaugh & Rodriguez 1991). Transformation and contemplation share a kinship, particularly in Carmelite spirituality which views *contemplation* as a path of individual and social transformation (Culligan and Gordis 2000:xvii).

The beloved's transformation in love is framed within the two poles of Sg 1:6 and Sg 8:12. It is described as a journey from self-depletion to self-giving. The neglect of her vineyard refers to the 'giving *away* of self' in compliance to the collective, while the eventual recovery of 'my own vineyard' implies the 'giving *of* self' in creative-generative expression. The early stages of the journey are described as inward looking, self-preoccupied and possessive (which is often the entry-level of spiritual direction); however, her ongoing exodus across the eight chapters of the poem gradually effects a conscious, authentic self-giving (which provides a creative-generative orientation to the practice of spiritual direction). On this basis, Sg 8:12 - 'But my own vineyard is mine to give' - is identified as the key to the poem's *raison-d'être* because the beloved herself is testimony to the transforming power of love. The testimony is the experiential realisation that I am fully loved, fully human, and fully alive in God. In turn, one's generative vineyard represents 'my gift of love to the Beloved'. The authentic and mature gift of self is one of dispossession or detachment, and is viewed against the backdrop of Ultimate Gift: of Jesus giving up his life for his friends (Jn 15). Similarly the realisation of who 'I am' is inextricably related to remaining in Jesus the True Vine, the divine *I AM*. Being in Christ, and in loving union with the Triune God, engenders deepening contemplation of the life of Christ (passion) and deepening identification with Jesus in the Paschal Mystery (compassion). The marks of a mystical life are faith, hope and love, though the keynote in Paul the mystic's musical score is love (1 Corinthians 13).

The Song of Songs in Contemporary Spiritual Direction

Based on the paradigm of the Song of Songs, I propose the terms *cojourner* and *seeker* for use in contemporary spiritual direction. Since the term spiritual 'director' is misleading because of authoritarian, hierarchical, confessional, managerial and prescriptive connotations, *cojourner* is preferred as it represents more accurately the incarnational nature of spiritual accompaniment, the human solidarity in co-discernment, and the fraternal relationship between persons on a similar journey in God. Since the word 'directee' is often perceived as

impersonal and passive, with close connotations to counselee or client, *seeker* is a proposed alternative as it clarifies the intentionality, responsibility, and response-ability of the person 'seeking' God and 'seeking' spiritual direction; 'seeker' is also consonant with the motif of *search* in the Song of Songs. I use the traditional term '*spiritual direction*' as it retains the ancient emphasis of *diakrisis* or discernment. *Spiritual* refers to the divine-human relation as the locus of the practice, a relationship which impacts on the whole person within the totality of a lived spirituality; while *direction* points to God as the 'principal agent' and guide, maintains the focus on attentiveness to the Spirit, and signifies a progressive movement that is commonly referred to as 'a spiritual journey'.

Christian spiritual direction might be described as a graced praxis of love which employs the art of accompaniment, the charism of discernment, and contemplative presence. With a heart to guiding seekers in the path of faith, hope, and love, the cojourner is an *anam 'ara* - friend of the soul and a friend of God (O'Donohue 1987). However, it is grace that evokes awareness of Ultimate Reality, awakens the need for an inner orientation, and induces the search for love, God, and self. The practice calls for a multiplex of listening skills and interdisciplinary insights, and works with the unique tapestry of a person's life. Discernment listens for the existential triggers, while intuiting the 'womb of human love' yearning for its Source and the 'womb of divine love' yearning for birthing in human lives. Attunement to the divine longing is an awareness of God the principal agent who desires and draws us in love.

Spiritual direction cooperates with the Spirit in exploring various levels of the existential self, in facilitating healing and transmutation of character, and bringing gradual psychic and spiritual harmonisation. The process invariably attends to dryness and disconnection (depletion), the healing of psychic wounds and psychological complexes, the painful purification of dark nights, and the deconstruction of false images of God, self, others, and the world. The recovery of one's true self in God (*imago dei*) is the delightful discovery of oneself as beloved of God, toward an intimate union of being who I am in the divine *I AM* (deification). The road to deification is long and painful; however, with Trinitarian relationality as paradigm for loving relationships and human community, and the Incarnation serving as Epiphany par excellence, the grace of sustained spiritual direction is becoming a living sacrament in the world and a living testament to God's transforming love. The transformative

journey is open-ended, in anticipation of the ineffable God who is infinite, yet intimate, Mystery.

The Canticle for Twenty-first Century Spirituality

In this second decade of the twenty-first century, significant movements are evident across the disciplines in general. In particular, the resurgence of interest in the Song of Songs, the allegorical method, and medieval spirituality suggest that the post-Enlightenment era may well be a crucial moment in the Song of Songs' historical journey. A case in point is Shanks' assertion, following Nietzsche, that where a religion is 'poetically impoverished' it is in the end 'not being religious enough' (2001:140). In what ways would the 'non religious' Song of Songs enrich twenty-first century 'religious experience' and spiritual praxis?

In exploring the Song of Songs as 'religious experience' or 'encounter with God', a contemplative disposition is required. Since human love is the literal, obvious sense of the Song text, an understanding of the 'religious dimension of human experience' (Barry 2004:20-37) clarifies the use of the Song of Songs in spiritual praxis, as follows: firstly, any human experience can have a religious dimension and can be an encounter with God (2004:21); secondly, the religious dimension of human experience is supplied by the believing and seeking person *and* by the Mystery encountered (2004:25); and thirdly, any human experience, hence any medium, can disclose God (2004:28). The salient biblical presuppositions in exploring the religious dimension of experience include: Jesus Christ historically as the revelation of God *par excellence* and the core of Christian love mysticism; the role of Scripture as informative and transformative; and interiority/subjectivity as the vital interaction of the divine Spirit and human spirit.

Religious experience is possible given the resonance between the Song of Songs and spiritual direction and the high correspondence between the poetic world and lived experience. 'Poetry is mimetic because it is mythic' (Ricoeur 1995:58), and the value of poetry is that it mimics reality in 'the hypothetical mode of fiction' (1995:240). Through the explicit use of metaphor and its allusions to myth and mysticism, the Song of Songs echoes 'the age of innocence' and engages 'the age of experience'; it also encapsulates the poetics of a 'paradise lost, paradise regained' (Trible 1978). It revisits the Garden of Eden, reopens the enclave of primordial love, recounts the myth of original blessing, and sings of an ongoing rebirth at the very heart of ordinary, everyday

existence (1988:299). The poem's perpetual sense of immediacy evokes the possibility of an ongoing rebirth of primordial love in the very heart of ordinary, everyday spirituality. Amidst life's paradoxes and perplexity, the poem incites a yearning for the Source of love at the very heart of reality. The song of redemption sings of the recovery of God's intention for humanity. It also points toward epiphany as a continuum, and provides a direction of hope and regeneration based on God's delight in creation (Trinitarian *eros* and *ekstasis*). This is why it is called the Song of Songs.

The Songs of Songs as 'iconographic text' (Davis 2006) provides a window to a poetic and imaginative world, yet mediates between the imagined and the real (Wolfson 2006). The relevance of this 'iconographic text' is that it invites one to take stock of one's own vineyard. While the icon is composed of the fragmentations of our broken existence, its composite beauty portrays the vision of psychological wholeness, union with God, and harmony within the cosmos. 'My own vineyard', or one's life as an existential project, is part of the continuum of the biblical story. Personal narrative might thus be viewed from the perspective of the immediate (through a live metaphor like the vineyard), the past (myths and mythological motifs), and epiphany (mystical symbols) - a wide lens for viewing personal story and for appreciating one's individual contribution to the large, unifying mosaic of the Triune God's presence and action in the human community and in the cosmos.

The Canticle as Poetic Enrichment and Spiritual Nourishment

Aesthetic appreciation of the Song of Songs engenders '*wonderment, fabulation and idealization*', three 'mental acts which play a constitutive role in culture, in general, and literature, in particular'; where *wonderment* invokes the true/intelligible, *fabulation* the beautiful/meaningful, and *idealization* the good/ideal (1992:4-5). Without poetic appreciation the spiritual life becomes 'a largely verbal technique', a 'prose-flattened world' (Burrows 2005a:342,341) emptied of emotion and imagination, and a disenchanting journey devoid of mystery. The Canticle as 'pure poetry' and 'pure lyric' brings poetic enrichment to didactic, discursive and analytical language because 'poets sing rather than explain reality; they offer a different way of being in the world than that of argument or demonstration' (2005a:357-358). Burrows questions whether theology can 'sustain itself in a form bereft of the musicality of language, a prosaic genre no longer edged with strong margins of the inarticulate, a limping literature that is incompatible with song' (2005a:356). The Canticle is a refreshing alternative to

rationalistic discourse because it is 'from one end to another a song and not in any way narration' (Ricoeur 1998:270-271).

The Song brings spiritual nourishment to contemporary life because of its greatness as biblical literature. The 'greatness of literature' is determined by 'its ability to convey new moral insights which are unexpected, which address the existential situation of the reader and which are continuous (in some respect) with the culture from which they emerge' (Ryba 1992:11). The Song of Songs has an extraordinary capacity to convey fresh images and transformative insights which address our contemporary context, are continuous with the biblical tradition, yet expand the interpretative horizon for new uses and reuses of the Song. With the human beloved as nexus of the poem and locus of transformation, I posit that without the Song of Songs our sexual and spiritual lives would be poetically impoverished.

Conclusion

The beloved as archetypal seeker speaks in 'non-religious', anonymous, and experiential terms, a voice that is accessible to the general Christian populace, and a timeless search for love, God, and self. Her transformation in love is an apt biblical-poetic paradigm for a contemporary spiritual journey and an experiential framework for spiritual direction. Two kindred spirits of the beloved in the Song of Songs are Teresa of Avila and John of the Cross, sixteenth century Spanish Carmelites who remain unrivalled as classic sources on love mysticism/Song of Songs/spiritual direction. Their sterling testimony is that immense suffering, mortification of spirit, and purifying dark nights go hand-in-glove with the transformation that delights and divinizes, while continuing to live fully this human life (Hardy 1992:143-146). The medieval monastic tradition and the contemporary practice of spiritual direction are significantly indebted to Teresa and John's experiential insights.

My postulation of the Song of Songs as a *Canticle of Spiritual Direction* is based on the resonance between an ancient poem and an ancient practice. With the *human beloved* as archetypal seeker searching for 'the one my heart loves', the Canticle is indeed the ageless song of the soul. By implication, contemporary cojourners and seekers can find in the Song of Songs the music and lyrics of their soul. The Canticle's subtle music is its tender invitation to 'Love Me!' Listening requires space and solitude, for it is in journeying with the beloved in the Beloved that we come to the interior knowledge of being called 'the beloved' and become attuned to the *mysterium tremendum* at the heart

of reality. This mystery of love is among the deepest, most difficult, and most profound paradoxes of life. Yet it is this love which calls forth the human soul – and the ministry of Christian spiritual direction.

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