



IGNATIAN MYSTICISM AND CONTEMPORARY CULTURE

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Ignatius the Mystic

OVER THE CENTURIES since his death in 1556, Ignatius of Loyola has been presented through a variety of images. For most of this period the dominant one was that of the soldier saint. This image drew partly on his patrimony in the bellicose minor aristocracy of the Basque country. Linked with this was his upbringing at court in the chivalric culture of the day, which included training in the art of warfare. Then there was the siege of Pamplona and his exploits there. But this image also drew on an interpretation—historically untrue—of the Society of Jesus as an order founded to engage in a spiritual warfare with Martin Luther and the Reformation.

Since the middle of the twentieth century the soldier saint has, to a large extent, been replaced by the mystic. There has been a certain amount of political correctness in this turnaround as (partly owing to feminist thinking) many today are uneasy with military images and terminology. To this may be added the ecumenical incentive to tone down the historical antagonisms between Roman Catholic and Protestant.

But these motivations do not account for the rediscovery of the mystical side of Ignatius. Indeed, the question of why, for over four hundred years, this aspect was half forgotten or deliberately underplayed is a long and fascinating story. Its rediscovery was in large part due to the renewal of interest in the original Ignatian sources, already under way earlier in the twentieth century but then mandated and given a massive boost by Vatican II. The image of Ignatius the mystic expresses a belief that it is his relationship with God that is the core of what makes him admirable, as well as being the source of his teaching and other achievements. It suggests that, in some way, everything that Ignatius

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said, did or wrote can be traced to his mystical experiences at Manresa, La Storta and Rome.¹

These were 'peak experiences' (to use Abraham Maslow's terminology) and are central to any understanding of Ignatian mysticism.² But Ignatius also had to live off-peak, as it were, and he realised that most people live off-peak most of the time. This does not mean that off-peak experiences cannot also be mystical. Or, to express the reality more adequately, Ignatius was a mystic, not just because of certain peak experiences but because mysticism became a way of life. This is the meaning of 'everyday mysticism'. Through his own experience Ignatius developed a wisdom which is available to us, mainly, but not exclusively, through the Spiritual Exercises. However, anything we discover or come to understand about Ignatius' mysticism must be brought into dialogue with the present. We need to ask contemporary questions of Ignatius and of the texts and tradition that he left us. So here I want to explore what Ignatian mysticism might look like in the lives of men and women today. What practical wisdom has he left us? How does his experience inform our current concerns? I begin with some reflections on contemporary culture.

Culture

Culture here does not mean high culture, focused exclusively on the arts. Culture, as we need to understand it, is rather the way in which a group of people live, think, feel, organize themselves, celebrate and share life. In every culture there are underlying systems of values, meanings and views of the world, which are expressed publicly in language, gestures, symbols, rituals and manners. This is the broader meaning of culture to which Paul VI was referring when he said that 'the split between the gospel and culture is without a doubt the tragedy of our times'.³

We have learnt that, for better or for worse, we cannot distance ourselves from culture. It is omnipresent, all-pervasive. Its images bombard our senses. Its ideas fill our minds. Culture is like the air we breathe, and it may be healthy or polluted. Much of the time we are not conscious

¹ Recorded in Ignatius' *Autobiography* (Manresa and La Storta) and *Diary* (Rome). For 'peak experiences' see Abraham Maslow, *Religions, Values and Peak-Experiences* (New York: Penguin, 1994 [1964]).

² They are the subject of my earlier article: 'The Mysticism of Ignatius Loyola', *Review of Ignatian Spirituality* (CIS), 116 (2007), 77-97.

³ Paul VI, *Evangelii nuntiandi* (1975), n.20. The 34th General Congregation of the Jesuits (1995), decree 4, n. 104 ('Our Mission and Culture') commented: 'The boundary line between the Gospel and the modern and postmodern culture passes through the heart of each of us. Each Jesuit encounters the impulse to unbelief first of all in himself' (in *Jesuit Life and Mission Today*).

of its influence on us. But it surreptitiously supplies us with many of our presuppositions—those beliefs and convictions that seem so innate in us that we rarely, if ever, think to question them. Culture is like a lens which may clarify or distort, without our realising which is happening. Furthermore, looking constantly through this lens can persuade us that ours is the only way of seeing.

Contemporary culture in the West, even though once shaped by Christian faith, often excludes all religious faith from among its accepted values. Faith is dismissed as superstition that the human family needs to outgrow. It is also presented as a source of social division. In the eyes of many of our contemporaries the Church has no credibility as a commentator on human life. It receives at best a guarded welcome in the academy and the marketplace.

Postmodernism

Postmodernism is the dominant cultural influence today in the Western world. It names a sophisticated philosophical system, but also a climate of opinion, an unreflective world-view that affects everyone. Postmodernism is not all bad. There was a need to puncture the arrogance of modernity, for example the belief in the inevitability of progress and the quasi-infallible status of the scientific method. Postmodernism brings a hermeneutic of suspicion even to our most cherished certainties. Deconstruction has its place and can even, paradoxically, have a purifying effect on religious faith. But, unfortunately, what is mostly associated with this philosophy is an extreme scepticism leading to a radical form of relativism. Its basic tenet is that truth is whatever is true for you. There is my truth and your truth, which are both inherently subjective. But there is no objective truth that might impose itself or make demands on either of us.

Furthermore, in postmodernism there is no longer any possibility of a metanarrative, an overarching story, myth or belief-system that is capable of giving meaning to all the dimensions of human lives. Hence Christianity is undermined because it professes to proclaim such a metanarrative, a good news story that offers meaning, and indeed salvation, to every person in every situation. Christians today are caught in a confluence of two opposing sets of presuppositions, one emanating from their faith convictions, the other from the dominant culture. The clash of these mutually antagonistic world-views is experienced both in society at large and in the inner life of each individual person. The split between culture

and the gospel, to which Paul VI referred, runs right through our own hearts and minds and sensibilities.

Sixteenth-Century Angst

The roots of Ignatian mysticism lie in a different historical context from ours, yet it was a comparable period of fluidity, transition and uncertainty. In the sixteenth century the shift was from a late medieval world-view to the early modern, just as we have experienced a transition from late modernity to the postmodern. The uncertainty that was rife in the sixteenth century was due to many causes: the philosophical and religious questioning instigated by the Renaissance; political turmoil and endless wars; the discovery of non-European civilisations and their cultural values; fear of Islam in the form of Turkish expansionism; the Protestant Reformation and the consequent break-up of the Western Church. Old certainties were being questioned. People felt adrift in an unfamiliar world.

As Ignatius went through his protracted conversion, first at Loyola, then at Manresa, he was focusing on his own odyssey, his own search for meaning and God. He got in touch with his deepest angst and it brought him to the brink of suicide.⁴ His pain, his fear, his panic were overpowering. I suggest that we place this entire ordeal within the drama, the crisis of a whole culture searching for meaning. Ignatius was certainly not aware of it, but sixteenth-century culture's struggle was in some way working itself out within him. Just so today, our contemporary postmodern culture's struggle with meaning works itself out within each of us.

Weltanschauung⁵

Ignatius was steeped in a theocentric *Weltanschauung*, or world-view: an understanding of all reality as having God at its centre. The sources of this world-view were partly his medieval cultural and religious inheritance and partly his mystical experiences at Manresa.⁶ Its clearest imaginative portrayal in the *Spiritual Exercises* is probably the Contemplation on the Incarnation (Exx 101–109). This aims at leading a person into the Trinity's

⁴ *Autobiography*, nn.22–27. By interpreting Ignatius' overt struggle with scruples as emblematic of something deeper, I am indeed going beyond the literal meaning of the text. However, I am also taking into account all his other inner struggles throughout his 'protracted conversion'.

⁵ *Weltanschauung*: the overall perspective from which we see and interpret the world.

⁶ *Autobiography*, nn. 28–30.



The First Day of Creation, by Johann
 Christoph Weigel

Ignatius a deep appreciation of the human person and of human values, as well as reverence for the cosmos. At Manresa Ignatius had received a profound insight into the mystery of creation:

One day it was granted him to understand, with great spiritual joy, the way in which God had created the world. He seemed to see a white object with rays stemming from it, from which God made light.⁷

God loved creation into being. It could only be good—and humankind very good.⁸ Some time later, on the banks of the Cardoner, Ignatius received further enlightenment:

As he sat there the eyes of his understanding were opened and though he saw no vision he understood and perceived many things, numerous spiritual things as well as matters touching on faith and learning [*letras*], and this was with an elucidation so bright that all these things seemed new to him.⁹

⁷ *Autobiography*, n. 29.

⁸ See Genesis 1:31.

⁹ *Autobiography*, n. 30.

Having seen how God created the world, Ignatius was now given to understand the secrets of that world. He was enlightened about the realities of the human spirit, about the mysteries of faith and about *letras*. What does he mean by *letras*? Since he distinguishes them both from ‘spiritual things’ and from ‘matters touching on faith’, he must mean secular learning, or (dare we say?) culture. It is quite extraordinary that secular learning should be part of a mystical experience. Yet there it is, taking its place beside spiritual and faith-related topics, or interwoven with them.

Ignatius a Humanist?

When Ignatius moved on from Manresa into the intellectual world of Alcalá, Salamanca and Paris, and later into ecclesiastical circles in Rome, he found that much in his thinking was in harmony with Renaissance humanism. By then this was the most influential cultural and educational movement throughout Europe. Nonetheless, there are certain ambiguities here. However much he accepted Renaissance values in education, his core religious convictions remained rooted in an earlier era. He never moved from his theocentric world-view to take on the anthropocentric world-view of most humanists.

Yet, within his theocentric world-view, Ignatius gave full value to the human. To associate the dignity of each human person with a creator God does not lessen, but on the contrary enhances, that dignity. The human person is made in the image and likeness of God.¹⁰ What greater dignity can there be? It follows that nothing human is merely human. No human enterprise, however secular, is merely secular. We live in a universe of grace and God’s action of divinisation is never interrupted. It is this combination of a medieval, theocentric world-view with a discerning embrace of Renaissance thought that gives Ignatius’ vision its unique character. It appears as early as the *Spiritual Exercises*.¹¹

William Bouwsma, writing about the Renaissance theory of education, *studia humanitatis*, and contrasting it with the medieval scholastic system, says that it ‘was more concerned with individual human beings, with their changing thoughts, values and feelings, and with human interaction in society’.¹² This statement readily calls to mind the approach that

¹⁰ See Genesis 1: 26–27.

¹¹ His later commitment to education is a further development.

¹² William J. Bouwsma, ‘The Spirituality of Renaissance Humanism’, in *Christian Spirituality II: High Middle Ages and Reformation*, edited by Jill Raitt (New York: Crossroad, 1987), 236–251, here 236.

Ignatius adopts in the Exercises. There he is 'concerned with individual human beings' (each person's unique relationship with God, one-to-one spiritual direction), 'with their changing thoughts, values and feelings' (emphasis on the retreatant's inner movements, consolation and desolation, examen, review of prayer), 'and with human interaction in society' (examen, but above all the election, seen as the retreatant's choice of a particular mode of insertion in the world of people and events). Nevertheless, through all this focus on the human person, God remains at the centre.

The Humanity of Christ

But where does Christ fit in? Even a cursory reading of the *Spiritual Exercises* reveals how deeply christocentric they are. To be christocentric is simply another mode of being theocentric. Ignatius' own christology is a high christology, a christology from above, beginning with the pre-existent Word who becomes flesh. Yet it is significant how the humanity of Jesus becomes the focal point of the gospel contemplations in the Exercises. A simple example: in the first prelude to the Call of the King we are asked 'to see with the eyes of the imagination the synagogues, villages, and castles through which Christ our Lord passed as he preached' (Exx 91). The image is of a human person (Jesus of Nazareth), among people in human locations (synagogues, villages and castles), performing human acts (walking and preaching).

It is through interacting with this human Jesus in a contemplative way throughout the Second Week that the retreatant moves, by means of a guided discernment, towards an election/choice—itself a profoundly human act. Then, in the contemplations of the Third and Fourth Weeks, whether the divinity hides itself, as during the passion, or manifests itself, as in the resurrection, this hiding or manifesting is always in and through the humanity of Jesus.

During the Renaissance to be human was a cause for celebration, and to be fully human was the goal of life. Ignatius acquiesced in this, so long as the human was being feted, not in a reductive sense, and not apart from God. For him the real value of the human derived precisely from its being immersed in God. The human is the field of God's activity, and Christ's humanity is the privileged instrument of God's engagement in our world. Our humanity, too, can become an instrument in God's hands, totally at God's disposal. In the Fifth Annotation retreatants are urged to offer 'all their desires and freedom to God so that His Divine

Majesty can make use of their persons and of all they possess'. And in the *Constitutions* Ignatius writes of the Jesuit becoming an *instrumentum coniunctum cum Deo* (an instrument closely united with God).¹³ Such is the goal of Ignatian everyday mysticism.

A Contemplative Stance

Throughout the Exercises, Ignatius is enabling the retreatant to become a contemplative person—a mystic. Even when we recognise that the election is the goal of the Exercises, it is clear that they are also a school or apprenticeship in contemplation. Indeed, without contemplation there can be no true election. The exercises of the Second, Third and Fourth Weeks are contemplations of the life of Christ. However, through the resonances that the gospel mysteries evoke in those who enter into them, these exercises become contemplations of the retreatants' own lives as well. Ignatius keeps insisting that retreatants reflect on themselves and draw some fruit from what they see and hear (contemplate) in prayer. If we are encouraged by Karl Barth to study theology with the Bible in one hand and the daily newspaper in the other, we are encouraged by Ignatius to make the Exercises with the Bible in one hand and our life experiences in the other. We will then be approaching the mysteries of Christ's life and our own with the same contemplative gaze. In this way a kind of blending occurs by which we see Christ's life experience through the lens of our own, and we see our life experience through the lens of Christ's. All this is the *sine qua non* for a good and sound election.

**We see Christ's
life experience
through the lens
of our own**

Let us now look at the exercise in which the contemplative stance is perhaps most explicit, although in a different mode: the Contemplation to Attain Love (Exx 230–237). Its dynamic may be familiar.

I am invited to ponder on God's gifts: those I share with others (creation and redemption) and those that are unique to myself. Most of all 'how he, the same Lord, desires to give me even his very self, in accordance with his divine design'. Hence I am moved to give myself to God. 'Take, Lord, and receive' Then I reflect on God's living within God's gifts: in every aspect of creation, in the humanity of Christ,

¹³ See *Constitutions* X. 2–3 [813–814].

in myself (made in the image and likeness of God, and so, appropriately, God's temple). 'Take, Lord, and receive' After that I mull over God's working for me in and through God's gifts: God activates and energises everything in an ongoing creation. 'Take, Lord, and receive' Finally, I open myself to the wonder of all these gifts descending from above, *de arriba*, 'just as the rays come down from the sun, or the rains from their source'. Here Ignatius evokes an awareness of my personal qualities and virtues participating in the analogous qualities and virtues in God, and (at least implicitly) of my own total being participating in the Being of God. Again, in response, I pray: 'Take, Lord, and receive'

Each of the four 'points' in this exercise aims at opening retreatants to receive contemplative graces. Yet these are to be hoped for, not only here and now in the ambience of the Exercises, but day by day in the life that lies ahead for the retreatants. This life is to become progressively more integrated through an ever-increasing ability to find God in every aspect of creation, and at every step in their unfolding personal history. Towards the end of the *Autobiography*, the mature Ignatius says of himself that he was:

... always growing in devotion, i.e. in facility in finding God, and now more than ever in his whole life. And every time and hour he wanted to find God, he found him.¹⁴

This is the horizon that draws us onward. Finding God in all things is not the starting point for Ignatius, but the outcome of a life spent *searching* for God—a life of everyday mysticism. Neither is finding God in all things *our* starting-point, but our goal. This grace requires much purification, enlightenment and, almost certainly, suffering before we are sufficiently sensitised to receive it. If we claim prematurely that we are able to find God in all things, it is more likely that what we are finding is not God but the self. Or, in other words, we are finding a god made in our own image rather than the transcendent God revealed in Jesus Christ. Such an experience is demonic rather than divine. Hence the crucial need for discernment, especially as taught in the Rules for Discernment of the Second Week (Exx 328–336), those more subtle rules that help unmask the demon who appears as an angel of light.

¹⁴ *Autobiography*, n. 99.

Into Great Silence¹⁵

Philip Groening's documentary on life in the Grande Chartreuse, entitled *Into Great Silence* (2005), has been described as one of the most mesmerising and poetic chronicles of spirituality ever created. Indeed it is more a contemplation than a documentary. Jesuits, along with others in the Ignatian tradition, experienced a profound resonance in viewing this almost entirely wordless film. Some returned to view (contemplate!) it more than once. Can we explain this paradox? How could people dedicated to a life of active ministry in the world be so moved by a portrayal of monks whose call is to withdraw from that world? What is it that lay at the heart of this strange affinity? I suggest that it lies in the value that both Ignatian and Carthusian spirituality place on interiority. The Carthusian cell (a small two-storey cottage with an enclosed garden) symbolizes this interiority in a physical way. The monk lives in his cell in order to cultivate interiority and so find God. Ignatian people carry their 'cell' in their hearts, entering it in recollection and prayer. They too cultivate interiority, but in the very different context of being inserted into the world.



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Still from Into Great Silence

¹⁵ An earlier version of what follows appeared in my *Ignatian Spirituality* (Dublin: Messenger Publications, 2009), 39–41.



A Carthusian cell

In an article I wrote on the friendship between Pierre Favre (Ignatius' first companion in Paris) and Gerhard Kalkbrenner (prior of the Carthusian monastery in Cologne) I concluded with this reflection:

To live in one's cell is to cultivate interiority. This is the wisdom inherited from the Desert Fathers and Mothers. The Jesuit (whose preferred house is the road) carries his 'cell' within his heart and enters into it in prayer and contemplation—thus cultivating interiority in the vastly different apostolic milieu. Without this 'cell' the Jesuit becomes superficial, spiritually desiccated, and (particularly today), secular. Favre and Kalkbrenner were both living in a cell in which alone they could find God. In finding God there, they also found one another in friendship.¹⁶

The Jesuit lived his everyday mysticism as much as the Carthusian.

The late Cardinal Martini, when asked what message Ignatius might have for the third millennium, answered:

I think there is one especially salient message Ignatius can give us: the great value of interiority. I mean by this everything that has to do with the sphere of the heart, of deep intentionality, of decisions made from within.¹⁷

¹⁶ Brian O'Leary, 'The Jesuit and the Carthusian: Tale of an Intriguing Friendship', *Religious Life Review*, 48 (2009), 133–142.

¹⁷ Carlo Maria Martini, 'Saint Ignatius Loyola: 450 Years from His Death', translated by John J. O'Callaghan, *The Yearbook of the Society of Jesus* (2006), 12–13, here 12.

I agree. Furthermore, interiority is an excellent one-word synonym for everyday mysticism. Self-knowledge, purifying the heart, the inner journey, finding one's centre, the still point—these and other similar ideas and images have always been present in the Christian spiritual tradition. They echo, but go beyond, the older Greek philosophical teaching attributed to Socrates: 'The unreflected life is not worth living'.¹⁸ In the Christian experience all of this is linked with prayer—not just saying prayers but praying from the heart, praying at all times, becoming people of prayer. Might we adapt Socrates and say, 'The life without prayer is not worth living'?

Interiority as Counter-cultural

The argument for interiority today is not simply that it has been a constant part of the Christian spiritual tradition. It is also that interiority is the antidote to much that is insidiously destructive in our contemporary society. The spread of materialism, the speed of life, the pressures of competition, the seductiveness of consumerism, the threat to our sense of security generated by economic recession, the mind-controlling power of the mass media, the intrusiveness of advertising—these and other influences mould our way of living. Busyness replaces reflectiveness, anxiety replaces serenity and the craving for instant gratification replaces thoughtful attention to long-term goals, especially those of the spirit. Even the quality of our most precious relationships is frequently put at risk. We are drawn to live superficially, on the surface of things, losing touch with our deeper and more real selves. The question 'What do you *really* want?' (as opposed to 'What would you *like*?) is often surprisingly difficult to answer.

Interiority, or everyday mysticism, is not an escape from our cultural milieu and the harmful aspects of its influence on us. It is not solipsistic or even self-centred. On the contrary, it is the prerequisite for our insertion into the world of relationships, active citizenship and Christian ministry. It determines the quality of our presence in this wider world and the fruitfulness and effectiveness of our influence on it. Remember how Martini spoke of interiority as 'everything that has to do with the sphere of the heart, of deep intentionality, of decisions made from within'. He was thinking of people living a full human life, with all its stresses and

¹⁸ Plato, *Apology*, 38a.

challenges, but living it out of their deepest selves, taking responsibility for their choices, bringing gospel values into society, being guided by the Spirit who dwells within them.

As Augustine said, God is *intimior intimo meo*,¹⁹ deeper within me than my own inner self. In the hidden recesses of our soul Creator meets creature, Divine Spirit meets human spirit. Awareness and openness to this mystery are the essence of everyday mysticism—not an occasional phenomenon but a way of life. Karl Rahner's well-known aphorism that 'The Christian of the future will be a mystic or he will not exist at all' is apposite here.²⁰ It needs to be taken on board, not only by individuals seeking God, but by all who are working for the renewal of the Church or are involved in the New Evangelization.

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¹⁹ Augustine, *Confessions*, 3.6.11.

²⁰ Karl Rahner, *Theological Investigations*, volume 20, translated by E. Quinn (London: Darton, Longman and Todd, 1981), 149.