

THE SPIRITUAL EXERCISES AND THE SPIRITUALITY OF THE EAST

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IGNATIAN MYSTICISM IS A MYSTICISM OF MEDIATIONS. In principle, anything in the world can be a window on to God. What makes it specifically a mysticism is some kind of intensification—Michel de Certeau spoke of an ‘excess’. Ignatian mystics have been given the grace and courage to place themselves at the very source of Ignatius’ spiritual vision, Ignatius’ spiritual energy.

It is the account of the Cardoner experience that points us to this source. Here Ignatius was in the open air; here he was free from constraints. As he stood between the mountain, the river and the town, a new way of understanding things was revealed to him, ‘spiritual things just as much as matters of faith and learning—and this with an enlightenment so strong that all things seemed new to him’. Here it was that ‘the eyes of his understanding began to be opened’.¹ It is this moment of enlightenment, what the Eastern tradition calls ‘the opening of the third eye’, that marks the transition towards the mystical.

How does this transition happen? How is it fostered by the *Spiritual Exercises*? How does this kind of mysticism compare with the spiritual way characteristic of the Christian East, the hesychastic way of devotion to the name of Jesus, and of nondiscursive, imageless prayer?

If Ignatian mysticism is a mysticism of mediations, the East is more concerned with how mediations disappear so that we can arrive at what is essential. We can illustrate this contrast in four different ways:

- while Ignatian mysticism depends on mediations through the human *body and psyche*, Eastern mysticism moves beyond these to access the ‘*spirit*’ through the ‘*place of the heart*’.
- whereas Ignatian mysticism is mediated *through Christ and through Scripture*, the Eastern Jesus prayer leads to *a state beyond all images*.

¹ *Autobiography*, n. 30.2.

- whereas Ignatian mysticism focuses on *the world and history*, and in particular on the option one makes in the election, Eastern mysticism is concerned with the '*divine energies*' and the state of *hesychia* (inner peace).
- whereas spiritual guidance in the Ignatian tradition centres on how the individual can encounter God with the help of *methods*, the East is more concerned with how *the Abba's holiness* mediates the Spirit, and with how *the relationship between mentor and disciple* nurtures the spiritual life.

In what follows, we look at each of these points in turn; I shall make a few references also to Eastern material that is not Christian.

Body, Soul, Spirit

The East and the West understand the human person in quite different ways. The *Spiritual Exercises*, following Western conventions, see the human person in terms of two realities: body and psyche (soul). The East speaks of three realities: body, psyche and spirit. This difference leads to quite contrasting understandings of spiritual growth.

Though the *Spiritual Exercises* speak of body and soul, they are in no way dualist. The body is involved in the spiritual process from the outset. There are plenty of instructions in the Additional Directions regarding the body (Exx 73-86). We must take care to focus our thoughts both before going to sleep and as soon as we wake up; we are to prepare each of the exercises with a brief prayer standing a pace or two in front of our designated place; we are encouraged to attend to our posture; we should adjust our environment in keeping with what we want to receive in the prayer; we should avoid laughing; we should think about our eating and sleeping habits; we should punish our flesh (interestingly, this is the word that Ignatius uses, not 'body'). In the Third Method of Prayer, we are encouraged to regulate our prayer according to the rhythm of our breathing—a point converging with the hesychastic tradition (Exx 258).

The exercise known as the Application of the Senses, at the end of each day from the Second Week onwards, draws the senses also into the process. Here, the imagination draws us from the body into the psyche. Every dimension of our bodily existence is brought together so that our sensory energy can be transformed into renewed sensibility.

As for the soul, Ignatian prayer from the First Week onwards involves the three powers of the soul. Ignatius picks up from Augustine

and from the scholastic tradition the classification of memory, understanding and will. In the meditation, all three of these are taken up and transformed spiritually. Thus, the work on the body, on the senses, and on the soul frees up the affections so that they can be redirected towards the person of Christ and towards gospel values such as poverty, compassion and humility.

If, however, we remain at this level, we are confining ourselves to what Eastern monasticism calls the 'active life'. All we are doing is to set in order what Ignatius often calls our 'disordered affections'.²

In the East, the concern is to transform rather than reform disordered affections. Eastern tradition is well aware of bodily penance, of fasts and vigils, and indeed of the good things that can come from sickness. But the stress is on the possibilities for revelation that this asceticism opens up. What is probably a fourteenth century text makes the point as follows:

The flesh is mortified or, rather, crucified with Christ, through fasting, vigils, sleeping on the ground, wearing coarse clothing (and only what is essential), through suffering and toil. In this fashion, it is refined and purified, made light and subtle, readily and unresistingly following the guidance of the intellect and rising upwards with it.³

Ignatius too can write in this vein. In the fourth of the Rules for Eating, he tells us that a prudent abstinence will enable us 'to sense more the interior knowledge, consolations and divine inspirations' which can indicate the right path for us (Exx 213.2). However, he remains reticent about evoking the revelations to which self-conquest opens us. Here, for instance, he simply refers to appropriate eating habits. The writers in the *Philokalia*⁴ go a great deal further. Ilias the Presbyter, for example, writes of how the heart can be 'shrouded in self-love, so that the world's foundations—the inner essences of things—cannot be revealed to it'.⁵ Freedom from destructive compulsions enables us to become transparent. Ignatius' austerities at Manresa in fact were one of the factors contributing to the Cardoner

² Exx 1.3, 16.2, 21.1, 157.2, 169.6, 172.5, 179.2.

³ This quotation here is from a text entitled the *Theoretikon*, traditionally attributed to Theodoros the Great Ascetic, but in fact at least fourteenth century if not seventeenth—translation from *The Philokalia: The Complete Text*, translated by G. E. H. Palmer, Philip Sherrard, and Kallistos Ware, 4 vols. with one forthcoming (London: Faber, 1979-1995), vol. 1, p. 42.

⁴ The title given to a compilation of Eastern spiritual writings from the fourth century onwards, made by Nikodimos of the Holy Mountain of Athos and Makarios of Corinth, and first published in 1782.

⁵ *Gnostic Anthology*, book 3, n. 13, in *Philokalia*, vol. 3, pp. 48-49.

illumination. Both traditions draw out links between spiritual growth and discipline, both corporal and psychological.

However, the book of the *Exercises* does not mention specifically the spirit: that within the human which is open to the closest union by virtue of its being already divine. At the level of the spirit, there occurs an identification with Christ, a divinization; we get beyond just following in Christ's footsteps, and move into a realm where the disciplines taught by the *Exercises* can be taken for granted. Here, in my opinion, Western theology and awareness suffer from a block: they cannot do justice to a mysticism of union or to divinization.

The late Parmananda Divarkar SJ once wrote about the Ignatian Exercises as follows:

We are making a mistake: instead of using the spiritual forces to transform the flesh and our whole being, we are using the forces of the flesh in order to transform the spirit. Ignatius' *Spiritual Exercises* are not there to encourage us to do what we ought. That would be only 'Logical Exercises' or 'Psychological Exercises'. He gives 'Spiritual Exercises' so that we can be helped to open our spirit to the action of God's Spirit: that is the enormous power that will transform us.⁶

For Divarkar, Ignatius' work at the level of psyche is meant to foster growth at the level of spirit. But things often go wrong: we end up using 'the forces of the flesh in order to transform the spirit'. This kind of distinction between the psyche and the spirit is Pauline (1 Corinthians 2:14-16). Paul is contrasting those who are and are not open to the wisdom of the cross, a wisdom which is a matter not of the soul or psyche, but of the spirit: 'for the spirit searches everything, even the depths of God' (1 Corinthians 2:10). However, Western theology and philosophy did not have a good sense of this distinction in Ignatius' time, and the problem has continued into our own day.

It is for this reason that what Ignatius says about 'consolation without preceding cause' is so convoluted, and seems to break into the text so abruptly:

To give a person consolation without preceding cause is for God our Lord alone to do; for it is distinctive of the Creator in relation to the created person to come in and to leave, to move the person interiorly, drawing him or her totally into love of His Divine

⁶ 'La experiencia de Dios que hace y configura a la persona humana', in *Ejercicios espirituales y mundo de hoy*, edited by Juan Manuel García-Lomas (Santander: Sal Terrae, 1992), p. 142.

Majesty, I say without cause, that is, without any previous perception or understanding of any object such that through it consolation of this sort would come by the mediation of the person's own acts of understanding and will. (Exx 330)

The preceding acts of understanding and will—acts that are supposedly absent here—are on the level of the soul or the psyche; the divine *irruption* to which Ignatius is referring occurs at the level of the spirit. The other Second Week Discernment rules are best read as wise counsel not to confuse these two levels. They have, however, often been misread in too rationalist a spirit. An Ignatian mysticism of mediation becomes then far too narrow, because it acknowledges only the soul or psyche. Clearly the psyche does play an important part in spiritual development, and it does stand open for spiritual transformation. But this transformation opens it up to a more profound level of human reality.

Jesus Christ

A similar pattern emerges when we consider the different roles of Christ in Ignatian and Eastern mysticisms. The *Spiritual Exercises* are very strongly christological. Three of the four Weeks are dedicated to contemplation of the Christ 'who has become human for me, so that I may love him and follow him more' (Exx 104). The concern is that we should participate in the movement of his incarnation; we should live human life in his company, die with him his death, live out with him his resurrection. It is Scripture which gives 'the true foundation of the story' (Exx 2.2).

Ignatian mysticism stresses life *with* Christ. This 'with' indicates companionship, friendship, discipleship, and also reciprocity. Christ becomes our model, the standard by which we judge our behaviour, the ideal leader.

Now, in the spirituality of the East, the accent falls, not on being *with* Christ but on being *in* Christ. Take for example the work by the fourteenth century Byzantine mystic, Nicolas Cabasilas, *Life in Christ*.⁷ Here, the key verbs are not 'follow', 'imitate' or 'call', but rather 'become', 'be transformed', 'integrate', 'unify', 'be divinized'. The constant repetition of the Jesus Prayer focuses on his *name*. In this devotional practice, one avoids images of any kind, because the image is just another objectification outside the self, whereas the mysticism

⁷ Translated by Margaret I. Lisney (Worthing: Churchman, 1989).

of the East centres on a complete identification, on the elimination of any duality. Thus Evagrios in the fourth century writes as follows:

When you are praying, do not shape within yourself any image of the Deity, and do not let your intellect be stamped with the impress of any form; but approach the Immaterial in an immaterial manner, and then you will understand.⁸

This focus on freedom from all matter is clearly different from Ignatius' contemplation on the incarnate Word, who is solidly material. Again, Eastern prayer leads a person from the invocation of the name into a silence beyond all words; by contrast, Ignatian prayer starts with the Word of God in the gospel scene, and moves towards the exercitant's word in the colloquy.

In hesychastic prayer, the name of Jesus is always present. Christ does have a mediating role here, but it is of a different kind from the function he has in the *Exercises*. Christ's name in Eastern mysticism is so much interiorized that Jesus' virtues enter into the heart of the one praying. Thus the one praying becomes Christ. Maximos the Confessor (c.580-662) seems to anticipate Eckhart when he writes:

Christ always desires to be born in a mystical way, becoming incarnate in those who attain salvation, and making the soul that gives birth to him a Virgin Mother; for such a soul . . . is not conditioned by categories like those of male and female that typify a nature subject to generation and corruption.⁹

Perhaps there is something similar in Ignatius during the colloquy in the Incarnation contemplation. Ignatius suggests we should ask 'according to what I feel in me, in order more to follow and imitate Our Lord, in this way newly incarnate' (Exx 109.2). It may be—though this interpretation is a little stretched—that 'in this way newly incarnate' could refer to how the Word has been born again in the exercitant's heart. But even if this interpretation is possible, the difference in stress is very clear. The interiorization of Christ in the *Exercises* is always connected with following him and serving him. In Eastern mysticism, the concern is with contemplative ecstasy.

This contrast may need to be nuanced. Maximos the Confessor put the matter as follows:

⁸ Evagrios the Solitary (otherwise known as Evagrius Ponticus), *On Prayer: One Hundred and Fifty-Three Texts*, n. 67, in *Philokalia*, vol. 1, p. 63. See also nn. 114, 115, and 117.

⁹ *On the Lord's Prayer*, in *Philokalia*, vol. 2, p. 294.

In the life of ascetic practice, the Word, adapted to the corporeal action of the virtues, becomes flesh. In the contemplative life, the Word, refined by conceptual images that are spiritual, becomes what he was in his principal state: the Word that was God and was with God.¹⁰

It would be too simple to say that the Exercises are concerned only with the active life, the life of ascetic practice, while hesychastic prayer fosters the full divinization proper to the contemplative monk. We do talk of Ignatian mysticism, because we have the conviction—and also, let us hope, the experience—that the Exercises enable us to progress to the end of the active way of psychology, morality and the virtues, so that we can begin on the unitive, contemplative way. In the dynamic of the Exercises, this identification with Christ finds its climax in the Contemplation to Attain Love, where there is no specific reference to Christ because he has been interiorized. The ‘Take, Lord, receive’ has clear eucharistic echoes. The exercitant’s whole being is taken up in their offering; they empty themselves out, and thereby imitate God. The ‘with Christ’ at the beginning of the process has become an ‘in Christ’. Christ is no longer other to me, but rather my deepest principle of identity.

The issues here are important when we are dealing with people who make the Exercises frequently or every year. It could be that they are given the gospel passages in a way that makes them regress to stages they have in fact moved beyond, stages where Christ is still external to them.

The Goal of Spiritual Experience

The Exercises are concerned with the mediation of God in history through a particular choice. It is for this reason that Ignatius works so intensively with the soul and psyche, and focuses on the humanity of Christ. Eastern mysticism is concerned with the experience of divine energies, also called the ‘light of Tabor’. Thus it concentrates on the mystical heart of each person in the spirit, and stresses how images are there to be surpassed. We can see parallels here outside Christianity, in the Zen *satori* and the Hindu *samadhi*. The different ways in which the traditions conceive the spiritual goal shape the whole structure of the spiritual processes they offer.

¹⁰ *Second Century on Theology and the Incarnate Dispensation of the Son of God*, n. 37, in *Philokalia*, vol. 2, pp. 146-147.

The Exercises are concerned to transform our affectivity and enlighten our understanding so that we can discover God's call to service in the world. The dethronement of the ego happens in and through a choice we make to do something. This decision makes us co-creators with God, partners in God's action. We are operating in the realm of the 'not yet'. The whole purpose of our experience of God is to foster our allegiance to the gospel cause—a cause that still has to be won in a world full of disorder and sadness.

The kind of spiritual experience looked for in the *Philokalia* is quite different. Here, the goal is that we lose ourselves in the contemplative ecstasy of divine beauty (the word *Philokalia* comes from the Greek words for 'love' and 'beautiful'). It transcends history; it is in the realm of the 'already'; it is eschatological:

... grace, once it has been conferred as a result of the purification of the intellect and the inner being, completely removes the veil in which humanity was wrapped by Satan after the fall, expelling every defilement and every sordid thought from the soul. Its aim is to cleanse the soul, so enabling it to recover its original nature and to contemplate the glory of the true light with clear, unimpeded eyes. Once this is achieved, humanity is here and now raised to the eternal world and perceives its beauty and its wonder. Just as the physical eye, as long as it is sound and healthy, gazes confidently at the sun's rays, so such a person, their intellect illumined and purified, always contemplates the never-setting light of the Lord.¹¹

It is only at a later stage that there are implications of this experience for the world and for history. Eastern mysticism is quite sure that the transformation of the world should ideally grow out of the experience of God. 'Find peace, and thousands around you will be saved', Seraphim of Sarov (1759-1833) used to say from his hermitage in the remote Russian forest. This peace is the interior state called *hesychia* by the monks of Mount Athos, the word after which the whole tradition is named. *Hesychia* involves the peace, tenderness, humility, and serene joy characteristic of a person transfigured.

The Ignatian tradition does not deny that such experience is possible, nor that one can live in this kind of way. But it does tend to be suspicious of a person who seeks and desires this. It regards *hesychia* as potentially a distraction from ethical engagement in history. The suppression of more mystical readings of the Application of the

¹¹ St Symeon Metaphrastis' *Paraphrase of the Homilies of St Makarios of Egypt*, n. 74, in *Philokalia*, vol. 3, p. 318.

Senses, from the second generation of Jesuits onwards, is one indication of this; another is the tendency to regard the first 'time' of election as exceptional.

If followers of Ignatian spirituality really want to claim that it can become mystical, it is not enough for them to protest that they have no suspicion of mystical experience. They have to make this experience the secret energy empowering what they do in the world. Ignatius' experience at the Cardoner was nothing but the light of Tabor shed over all things. Now more than ever we need to integrate the different spheres of experience. The Ignatian way is a mysticism of 'all things'; it is a mysticism of the 'both-and' rather than the 'either-or'. More specifically, we need to find ways of making the Exercises a school of silence, not just of the word. Any word is already an interpretation. Our culture is sated with words, with mediations that obscure rather than disclose the real.

The East offers this silence, this antidote to too many words and images. Unless the Exercises can lead us back to the source from which the words they contain spring, they will end up as mere mental gymnastics and will not in fact help us to achieve anything. If, by contrast, the Exercises are offered in such a way that 'the Creator can communicate himself to his devout soul, inflaming it with his love and praise' (Exx 15.3-4), then a person can channel all this divine energy into the transformation of the world and the redemption of history. In an age like our own, bedevilled as it is by vague mystical or pseudo-mystical trends, the Exercises can help us to see that silence is something other than an opting out. Silence can be a sign, rather, of how human and divine energies are being concentrated on our choices, so that we make them boldly and with confidence. In other words, the self-effacement characteristic of mystical experience can become the most powerful force of all. It can be the context in which we dedicate ourselves freely. This kind of self-commitment is quite central to the Ignatian way.

Moreover, there is no contradiction at all between the state of *hesychia* and Ignatian spirituality—quite the contrary. One of Ignatius' explanations of consolation speaks of 'any interior joy which calls and attracts to heavenly things and to the salvation of one's soul, quietening it and giving it peace in its Creator and Lord' (Exx 316.4). In a transfigured person, this interior joy and peace are not confined to particular moments. Ignatius is quite explicit on this point in a letter to Francis Borja in 1545:

I like to think that when persons go out of themselves and enter into their Creator and Lord, they enjoy continuous instruction, attention and consolation; they are aware how the fullness of our eternal Good dwells in all created things, giving them being, and keeping them in existence with his infinite being and presence.¹²

Giving the Exercises and Spiritual Parenthood

Those who give the Exercises need to know how to lead others towards this interior state of continual communion with God. They must know how to put forward, in the circumstances of everyday life, the Ignatian way in its full mystical reality. They must therefore be women and men who have had this kind of Tabor experience—men and women who, as Ignatius might have put it, have moved out of themselves and entered into their Creator and Lord.

In the Ignatian tradition, the one who gives the Exercises passes on a method. It is important that there be a proper distance between the one giving and the one receiving the Exercises, so that the one giving does not interfere what must be the exercitant's direct dealings with God.

The one giving the Exercises has fundamentally three roles. Firstly, they must put the method forward, with a sense of how the individual parts fit into the whole process. Secondly, they must 'narrate the history faithfully' (Exx 2.1)—in other words, put forward the points for prayer briefly and concisely. Thirdly, they must help the individual with the discernment of spirits.

Ignatian guidance works properly when the individual is allowed to develop their own relationship with God. The role of the intermediary is minimal, and dependence is to be avoided. There is a risk in this way of proceeding: people can fall into the trap of thinking that the method works automatically, and fail to acknowledge the almost sacramental quality of the interaction between the one giving and the one making the Exercises. It can be that the methods cease to mediate, and become an obstacle.

The Eastern tradition is much more at ease with the idea of a spiritual master and his disciple, using without hesitation metaphors of parenthood. The relationship centres not on a method that has to be taught, but on a Spirit-filled witness that can bring to birth the experience of God in the other. A contemporary monk on Mount Athos expresses the matter like this:

¹² Ignatius to Francis Borja, late 1545; see *Inigo: Letters Personal and Spiritual*, edited and translated by Joseph A. Munitiz (Hurspierpoint: Inigo Enterprises, 1995), p. 64.

Father,
 what is the colour of the light of your eyes,
 that you can contemplate everything before you and make it live?
 What is the power of your breath,
 that your joy dissolves all my wounds?
 What is the power of your mouth,
 that you can sculpt my innermost self into a chalice?
 You accompany me wherever I go with the caress of your regard;
 silently, you see me home into a place of rest.
 Through your words, you let me hear myself;
 through your eyes, you let me see myself.
 Living witness, the world may sustain you, but you sustain the
 world,
 and in each of your gestures you spread the Presence that dwells
 within you,
 pointing out to me always the one and only goal:
 the Living God.¹³

The Ignatian tradition lacks any feeling for this kind of relationship. There are advantages in this: we avoid the traps of dependency or idealization. But the risk is that we are given merely a method, and nothing human behind it. When he was killed, Albert Camus left behind an unfinished novel, in which, at the age of forty, one of the characters 'discovered that he needed a father: not a power, but an authority'.¹⁴ People today are looking for the kind of mediation that that comes from transfigured faces—faces which, without words, convey the reality of the One whom they have seen.

Hindu tradition speaks of three ways in which the spiritual master or mistress can bring forth fruit in the disciple: through the word, through looking silently, and through touch. Literally, *guru* means 'the one who scatters the darkness'. Blessed are we if we can live in the realm of transparency and liberty. And more blessed still if we can speak, look, and touch with liberated, transfigured hearts.

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¹³ Frère Jean, *Hommes de lumière* (Paris: Mame, 1988), p. 86.

¹⁴ Albert Camus, *Le premier homme* (Paris: Gallimard, 1994 [1960]), p. 288: 'A ses quarante ans, il découvre qu'il avait besoin d'un père: non d'un pouvoir, mais d'une autorité'.