

ALL UNAWARES

Evangelical Spirituality as a Preparation for the Ignatian Encounter

Beth Dickson

‘THE WAYS OF GOD are deeply consoling.’ These words were the first live signal that I received about Ignatian spirituality. I had taken up a post teaching English at St Aloysius College, a Jesuit school in Glasgow. I attended a series of twilight sessions to educate all new members of staff about who the Jesuits were and what they stood for: Ignatius’ work on education was a key focus. I remember thinking that, of all the things that could have been said about God, the idea of consolation was a positive one; it was also one that I had never heard in exactly that form before. Being a Protestant Evangelical, brought up in a fundamentalist sect known as the Open Brethren (sometimes called the Plymouth Brethren or the Christian Brethren), I was not perhaps the most likely person to be hearing those words in that place.¹ Aspects of my earlier Christian identity, however, did make it possible for me to relate positively to Ignatian spirituality; I shall fill in a bit more autobiographical detail which will identify these before going on to discuss more generally those areas in which Ignatian spirituality speaks cogently to Evangelical experience.

Brethren

I was born into a deeply committed Christian family. Evangelical Christianity went back at least four generations on each side. I have no memory of a time when I did not know who Jesus was. I was brought

I am indebted to the generosity of Dr I. Randall, Ridley Hall, Cambridge, whose references considerably strengthened the second half of this essay.

¹ The Open Brethren are distinguished from the Exclusive Brethren (also sometimes called Plymouth Brethren) as the result of a split in the Brethren movement in 1848. The differences between them are chiefly structural rather than theological.



Gospel Hall, St Andrews

up on bible stories in home and at church. Each Sunday I learnt a memory verse for Sunday school, where there were songs, quizzes, stories and teaching. As I grew older I also attended a teaching service on Sunday afternoons where we sang hymns—some of which were from the classical Protestant tradition—and listened to the Bible being read and expounded. On Sunday evenings we attended an evangelistic service: bible readings, often from the Gospels but sometimes Old Testament narratives, were the basis of clear and simple explanations of the gospel. This service—aimed at those who did not profess Christianity—featured jollier singing (of the Moody and Sankey variety). On Tuesday evenings there was an intercessory prayer service and a conversational bible study in which men sat round, read a passage of scripture and then discussed what it meant.

The main service, or ‘meeting’ (Brethren eschewed ecclesiastical language), which I did not attend until the age of fourteen, was ‘the morning meeting’. This was a communion service which focused on the life, death and coming again of Jesus Christ. Men would give out hymns from *The Believers’ Hymnbook*, a large proportion of which were written for that service. Older Scottish traditions of unaccompanied singing held good and we required a precentor to ‘start the singing’. There were readings from scripture and prayer. Preaching or expounding scripture was not appropriate for this service; neither was thinking about ourselves

or our sins. The service existed to bring glory to Christ and, ambitiously, to honour the Son for those reasons for which he was honoured by the Father. This meeting was a key carrier of Brethren spirituality and identity. Every week of the year it could take on the atmosphere of Good Friday, because the climax of the service comprised communion prayers which centred on the broken body and the shed blood of Jesus at Calvary.

Because of the pervasive sadness of these services, my mother did not think it wise to take children to it. Even when I did start attending, I was intensely aware of the sacredness of the occasion, when ordinary men with no clerical training, often drawn from business people and the working classes, took on the role of priests and led worship which, at times, expressed a depth of commitment and love that provoked miners and shopkeepers, fishermen and engineers to weep over the death of their Saviour—this in a culture where men rarely showed emotion, far less shed tears, in public.²

By the time I was ready to go to university, those aspects of the Brethren that I found irritating—uneven quality in the preaching, unwillingness to use any bible translation except the King James version, unwillingness to find any musical instrument other than an electric organ acceptable, experiences of God's guidance which seemed to me exaggerated, a private hymn list I called *These You Have Hated*, the complete unwillingness even to contemplate an extended role for women in the Church—were more apparent to me than the grounding of a faith in which my spiritual life could grow and deepen. However, my experience did leave me with a clear sense of whether or not I had had a spiritual experience, as well as a personal Geiger counter which could identify nugatory or unreal spiritual experiences, no matter how sincerely they were presented to me by others. Even I knew that if you asked God for bread, God would not give you a stone.

At university an understanding of Reformed theology mediated by James Packer's *Knowing God* and the clarity of John Stott's *Basic Christianity* filled in my doctrinal gaps—that is, most Protestant doctrines apart from those I already understood, which were justification by faith and a dramatic, if somewhat unusual, set of ideas about eschatology.³ The interface with

² For a more detailed account of spirituality among Scottish Brethren, see Neil Dickson, *Brethren and Scotland 1838–2000: A Social Study of an Evangelical Movement* (Milton Keynes: Paternoster, 2002).

³ See James Packer, *Knowing God* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 1973); John Stott, *Basic Christianity* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 1958). In reading both these authors I was blithely unaware of the main

Evangelicalism enabled me to develop my Christian thinking in terms not only of what the faith actually meant but also of how it related to other areas of thought and behaviour. I became less fundamentalist and more Evangelical, by stages sloughing off the dogmatic approaches to Christianity that had characterized me, and enjoying the transdenominationalism of Evangelicalism. This provided a degree of spiritual relief, and I became active in contemporary debates about the role of women within the wider reaches of the Brethren when I became the news editor for *Aware* (formerly known as *The Harvester*), a magazine that served the more progressive elements of the Brethren in the UK. I also served on the Council of the UK Evangelical Alliance.

Meeting other editors of the magazine for which I was writing, I found Brethren who were much more open to working with Christians from other denominations and who seemed to have fingers in every Protestant evangelical pie. I was also introduced formally to the history of the Open wing of the Brethren. Of its foundational leaders, the one whose ideas appealed to me most was Anthony Norris Groves, who encapsulated one of the early motivations of meeting as ‘brethren’: an early nineteenth-century frustration with the barriers that meant a Christian from one denomination could not take communion in another denomination. Groves had written:

I therefore know no distinction, but am ready to break the bread and drink the cup of holy joy with all who love the Lord and will not lightly speak evil of his name. I feel every saint [Christian] to be a holy person, because Christ dwells in him, and manifests Himself where he worships; and though his faults be as many as the hairs of his head, my duty still is, with my Lord, to join him as a member of the mystical body, and to hold communion and fellowship with him in any work of the Lord in which he may be engaged.⁴

I found this assertion of a common life very congenial, as it swept away at a stroke all the interminable arguments with which Christians seemed preoccupied. (I had enough discernment even then to know that the study of theology was not for me.) The idea that you could leave arguments

divergences in Evangelicalism in the twentieth century between Reformed and Anglican expressions. See Ian M. Randall, *Evangelical Experiences: A Study in the Spirituality of English Evangelicalism, 1918–1939* (Carlisle: Paternoster, 1999).

⁴ *Memoir of the Late Anthony Norris Groves*, edited by Mary Groves (London: James Nisbet, 1857), 48.

to one side and just try to get on with people because they loved Jesus seemed deeply consoling.

Despite seemingly firing on all cylinders, I was aware of a personal lack. First, I could not get out from under an unshakable sense of guilt. Cerebrally, I knew that I trusted in Christ for salvation and I believed that his work was able to do this for me. In my head all was well, but not in my heart. If ‘all our righteousnesses are as filthy rags’ (Isaiah 64:6; KJV), then how could anything I did ever be worthy? Any good action would have to be shot through with sin somehow, and continual misdemeanours—how could they be accounted for after conversion?

Secondly, I could not sustain a regular personal prayer life. Like other Evangelicals, Brethren advised a daily period of personal devotion known as the ‘Quiet Time’. This took the form of reading a passage of scripture and thinking about what it meant for your behaviour that day before praying. It could have come close to *lectio divina*—for some people it possibly did, but I had tied myself up in at least two sets of knots. First, the action of God in scripture was hermetically sealed in history. Divine activity did seem to take place in foreign missions, but was not obvious to me in my own surroundings. Secondly, I was suspicious of people saying that, when they had been reading the Bible, God had told them to do this or that—mainly because it seemed to me just to be a way of saying that God had given them permission to do what they wanted to do anyway.

Spiritual life consisted of highs and doldrums. Sometimes it would lift me up to be with other Christians for a weekend of worship and preaching, and sometimes music and singing would also pacify me, but none of these things seemed to last. What did last was the gnawing



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feeling that I did not have the same sense of being a Christian that other people seemed to project. And I could not understand why I was not able to pray. But I just could not sustain it. The years passed.

By the time I arrived at St Aloysius, I had a husband and two children, the younger of whom was just beginning school. I was very happy to have secured the post. The College gave me a permanent income for the first time; it was a private school, which meant different pressures from those in the state sector. It took its religion seriously; moreover it was a Catholic school and I was a Protestant—so my arrival was a delicious insult to west-of-Scotland sectarianism, as well as a confirmation of my own view that Christians *qua* Christians were my relations in Christ. At a deeper level of quiet, of which I was unaware, silently and surprisingly, the strong foundations and the patchwork experiences of life had prepared me to encounter, and benefit from, Ignatian spirituality.

Evangelicalism and Ignatian Spirituality

When, along with the rest of the staff, I was asked to consider various ways of deepening my spiritual life, I opted to begin the Spiritual Exercises in Daily Life. I began around October 2000 and completed them in July/August 2001. The first encouragement was that I had, at last, been able to sustain a reasonably regular prayer life. I kept being so surprised that I was still praying, that prayer was possible, and that what I presented to the director seemed to be not laughable. I was basing my prayer on the Bible, which I loved and with which I was so familiar.

Setting out on the First Week, I was not reading the *Spiritual Exercises* but was entirely dependent on my director. His skill in giving the Exercises I now regard as crucial in enabling me to continue. The issue of sin was neuralgic to me and could easily have derailed me. The prayer with which I finished the First Week did deal with feelings of fear,

A
profound
sense of being
a Christian

horror, panic, need and limitation, but also of divine strength, protection and an overwhelming willingness, without any reluctance, to put that love at my disposal. Later I realised that, during the Exercises, God had not chided me about my own sin. It seemed to be much less important to God than I had been led to believe. There had been no shouting, no anger, no raging, no banging of lecterns, no sendings to hell, no interminable castings of doubt on the quality of Christian living. Since then I have had a profound sense of being a Christian. I did not produce this sense, or achieve it; it

was done in me; I was given it through grace alone by faith alone. During the Second Week I did come to a clear realisation that God was not only active in the Bible and in history but *had been active in my life* as I was enabled to connect times of peace and love with God's presence.

My experience, as I have presented it so far, is a worked example of those aspects of Evangelicalism which prepared me to respond positively to Ignatian spirituality. Now I would like to move from a personal narrative to a more formal discussion in which to frame the relationship between Ignatian and Evangelical spirituality. Personal accounts have their uses, but their strengths are also their limitations: age, gender, specificity of context (both geographical and denominational), personal capacity and personality. Not all Evangelicals are like me. I cannot report any influence from Ignatian spirituality on Brethren groups as far as I know, but the picture is different when we look at Evangelicalism more broadly.

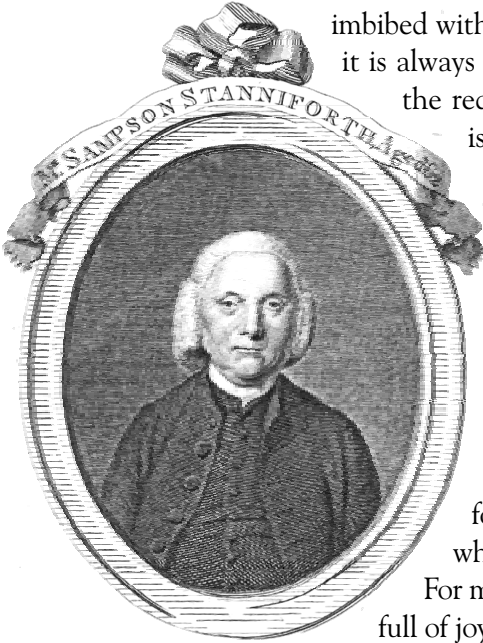
Because Evangelicals uphold credal expressions of Christianity, theological differences with Roman Catholicism are of limited use in explaining how Evangelicals are prepared for the Ignatian encounter. Evangelicalism, a product of the Enlightenment much influenced by Romanticism, is perhaps more effectively approached historically and through its spirituality. Evangelicalism has been defined by one of its key historians as having four aspects to its Christian culture, which it holds together in such a way as to make its identity distinctive. These are:

Conversionism, the belief that lives need to be changed; activism, the expression of the gospel in effort; Biblicism, a particular regard for the Bible; and what may be called crucicentrism, a stress on the sacrifice of Christ on the cross.⁵

Of these features biblicism, pre-eminently, prepares someone for the Ignatian encounter. Many Evangelicals will have experience of private bible reading, and of listening to the Bible being the basis of preaching. They will have an elevated view of scripture, regarding it as *the* authority for faith and life: 'The principle of applying the Scriptures to daily life is fundamental to evangelical spirituality'.⁶ Bible knowledge may have been

⁵ David W. Bebbington, *Evangelicalism in Modern Britain: A History from the 1730s to the 1980s* (London: Unwin Hyman, 1989), 8.

⁶ Liz Hoare, *Using the Bible in Spiritual Direction* (London: SPCK, 2015), 87.



imbibed with varying outcomes for spiritual well-being, but it is always fertile ground for a director. For Evangelicals, the request to think about a passage from the Bible is the most normative way imaginable in which they could be invited to deepen their spiritual life.

Many Evangelicals will have experienced a conversion. They will point to an occasion during which the claims of Christ on their lives became real to them and when they trusted in him for salvation. This event depends entirely on view that the death of Jesus on the cross—the shedding of his blood for the forgiveness of sins—achieved the means by which human beings could be put right with God.

For many the conversion event is deeply emotional—full of joy, or a sense of relief, a sense of freedom, a sense of being whole and being loved. One of Wesley's early preachers, Sampson Staniforth, gave this account:

As soon as I was alone, I kneeled down and determined not to rise, but to continue crying and wrestling with God, till he had mercy on me. How long I was in that agony I cannot tell; but as I looked up to heaven I saw the clouds open exceeding bright, and I saw Jesus hanging on the cross. At the same moment these words were applied to my heart, 'Thy sins are forgiven thee'. My chains fell off; my heart was free. All guilt was gone, and my soul was filled with unutterable peace.⁷

The confluence of the death of Christ and its meaning for the believer drawn into a moment of time can be intensely powerful. Indeed, it gave rise to a form of evangelistic outreach known as 'giving one's testimony', in which a person recounts his or her conversion, and these accounts can have a profound effect on those who listen. This is not so much a matter of the contingent drama of the event, but of the inherent drama of the gospel, that God, because God wanted to, gave Godself freely for ordinary people—for those who live next door or get the same bus to

⁷ Sampson Staniforth, 'A Short Account of Mr Sampson Staniforth, in a Letter to the Rev. Mr Wesley', *The Arminian Magazine*, 6/2 (February 1783), 72, cited in Bebbington, *Evangelicalism in Modern Britain*, 5.

work. Sometimes the psychological release experienced on such occasions can be the spiritual well spring for the rest of a person's life.

Spiritual experiences of conversion, clearly linked in Sampson Staniforth's account with crucicentrism, show similarities with experiences of the First Week of the Exercises. The issues of the sinfulness of sin in the context of God's forgiving love in Christ and the peaceful security obtained through faith are distinguishing features of both Ignatian and Evangelical spirituality.

Some Evangelicals go on to mistake the lack of emotional fizz in the years following their conversion for a lack of commitment in themselves, rather than an invitation to deepen their prayer life. But because of the links in the First Week with the past and the future, the Exercises can provide balm for those whose entire spiritual life rests on a brief experience which cannot, by its theological nature, be repeated, but for whose intimacy and warmth they continue to yearn. The poet and hymnodist William Cowper's complaint, 'Where is the blessedness I knew when first I saw the Lord?', articulates this feeling precisely.⁸ The First Week is also useful for any Evangelicals whose movement towards following Christ was more gradual and not so sharply defined, and for children brought up in Evangelical families whose experience of 'conversion' would, of necessity, be age-related.⁹

Jesuits are no strangers to activism, the remaining characteristic by which Bebbington defines Evangelical identity, and neither are Evangelicals. The *Contemplatio* at the end of the Exercises prepares directees for a life of Christian service. The purpose of Evangelical activism—to go into all the world and make disciples of all nations (Matthew 28:19)—is similar to that of Ignatius in its scope, focus and ambition. Evangelical work in social welfare has a long history, in the campaigns to abolish slavery led by William Wilberforce, the work to alleviate the conditions of child workers led by the Earl of Shaftesbury and the work to abolish child prostitution led by Josephine Butler. David Bebbington cites the example of Thomas Chalmers, a Scottish minister who was later to become a leader in the Disruption that led to the creation of the Free Church of Scotland.

⁸ William Cowper, 'O for a Closer Walk with God', in *The Task and Selected Other Poems*, edited by James Sambrook (Abingdon: Routledge, 2013), 242.

⁹ Beth Dickson, *The Secret Life of an Evangelical* (London: Partnership, 2005).

In his early ministry he was not an Evangelical. After the satisfactory discharge of his duties, Chalmers commented at the time, 'a minister may enjoy five days in the week of uninterrupted leisure'. After his conversion, by contrast, Chalmers was reputed to have visited 11,000 homes in his Glasgow parish during a single year. Evangelicalism brought about a striking change of attitude.¹⁰

Chalmers is by no means the only Evangelical titan. 'Overseas missions were to remain a permanent expression of the energy that characterised the Evangelical movement.'¹¹ For countless Evangelicals activism was no hindrance to a mature spiritual life.

If these areas are fertile grounds for spiritual directors, they are also fertile ground for the bad spirit. Each of the facets of evangelical identity can generate difficulties for the believer. Biblicism can lead to not being able to see the wood for the trees: a veneration of scripture that avoids the encounter with Jesus as it focuses on cerebral, rather than emotional, responses and may be inclined to devalue the life of emotions.¹² Conversionism may focus on spiritual birth at the expense of growth. Crucicentrism can lead to feelings of unworthiness, especially if there has been undue emphasis on the iniquity of sinners. The bad spirit subtly twists these contexts of grace into bonds that imprison the person, who may develop a sense of being responsible for 'saving the world' and enter into self-blame when that does not happen.

However, it is often the predominance of activism which colours these other aspects. While the Ignatian way advises a balanced diet of activism and spirituality, for Evangelicals the balance is often disproportionately taken up with activism. While the importance of prayer is an acknowledged priority, not a few Evangelicals will express frustration that their experience of prayer, though dutiful, is dry or intermittent. This frustration is acute among those who in all other aspects seem to be maturing as expected. More work is usually prescribed (either by the self or another trusted friend or leader) as a solution. The lurking danger is burnout, as Christians with an ethic of sacrificial commitment can lack the

¹⁰ Bebbington, *Evangelicalism in Modern Britain*, 11, citing Thomas Chalmers, *Observations on a Passage in Mr. Playfair's Letter to the Lord Provost of Edinburgh Relative to the Mathematical Pretensions of the Scottish Clergy* (Cupar: R. Tullis, 1805), 11.

¹¹ Bebbington, *Evangelicalism in Modern Britain*, 42.

¹² See Tim Mountain, 'Spiritual Direction and Baptists', *The Baptist Ministers' Journal*, 322 (April 2014), 10–14.

physical or spiritual self-care to deal with the workload they have willingly undertaken. Twisted from its gospel place, such activism can mean that, even though Evangelicals know that they are justified by faith, the workload they have shouldered becomes too heavy and they begin to feel as if they are sanctified by works.

There is very little understanding in Evangelicalism of what contemplative prayer is, or its place in the Christian life, as an element—just like activism—which enables the Christian life to be lived in a healthy way. Similarly, if activism is not understood by outsiders as a form of prayer, it will be hard for non-Evangelicals to account for the relentless activity undertaken by Evangelicals, whether they are called to it or not. Getting Evangelicals to understand that *ora* can be more than *labora* is another crucial point addressed by the Exercises as one learns to order one's desires. Asking them to consider scripture imaginatively gives the mind something to do which it regards as healthful. Helping them to notice where God is in their lives, discerning God's will for them and receiving God's strength through a revitalised prayer life has the potential for personal and collective edification.

Those features of Evangelicalism outlined above prepare Evangelicals to learn from the Spiritual Exercises and for that encounter to be satisfying for both director and directee. There are some smaller issues which may raise problems for some from an Evangelical background. The first is that many Evangelicals will be unfamiliar with the visual culture of Catholicism; they are very likely to be unused to frequent encounters with images of the Virgin Mary. Some may have a belief that it is wrong to make images of God, though for others this may make little difference.

The second issue is related to the role of the director. Many Evangelicals, on hearing about the Exercises, will want to try to do it for themselves by reading a book. Both James Wakefield's *Sacred Listening* and Larry Warner's *Journey with Jesus* are useful guides for Evangelicals and Protestants more generally.¹³ Wakefield's book has a helpful glossary of spiritual terms which may be unfamiliar to Protestants. However, the dialogic nature of the Exercises cannot be ignored. Without a director to explain the phenomenon and purpose of desolation it would be very easy

¹³ James Wakefield, *Sacred Listening: Discovering the Spiritual Exercises of Ignatius Loyola* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2006); Larry Warner, *Journey with Jesus: Discovering the Spiritual Exercises of Saint Ignatius* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 2010).

to become discouraged and give up. Evangelicals are likely to be greatly calmed by Ignatius' insistence that directors need to allow 'the Creator to deal immediately with the creature and the creature with its Creator and Lord' (Exx 15). But without a director, who will enable directees in heady periods of consolation, who really do feel that they can save the world, to rein themselves in?

In conclusion, within the Body of Christ, there is no Reformation, there is no Catholic or Protestant for we are all one in Christ Jesus (Galatians 3:28), charged to keep 'the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace' (Ephesians 4:3). That said, during the five hundred years since the Reformation, the relationship between Catholics and Protestants has often been turbulent and sometimes hostile. The decline of Christianity in the UK means that, as the 'last men standing', Catholics and Evangelicals are more likely to meet each other and to be aware of each others' views. There is within the Evangelical tradition a great deal of material which, if sifted through the Spiritual Exercises, could, along with similar Catholic material, become a revitalising dynamic in the life of the Body of Christ. Instead of seeing each other as the Other, we may come to recognise in each other, ourselves, in Christ. The ways of God are deeply consoling.

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