

The Spirit in Contemporary Culture

THE CREATURE AND THE SOVEREIGN SELF

The Anthropology of the Spiritual Exercises and Contemporary Spiritual Narcissism

Helen Orchard

Human beings are created to praise, reverence, and serve God our Lord, and by means of doing this to save their souls. The other things on the face of the earth are created for the human beings, to help them in the pursuit of the end for which they are created. (Exx 23)

To recognize oneself as a sovereign being is to acknowledge one's own total spiritual autonomy and unconditional entitlement to self-determination. It is a primary avowal of oneself as a free and natural human being—not a serf, a subject, a corporate entity, or even a citizen.¹

PERHAPS IT IS A TRUISM to contend that a text written by a Spanish priest in the sixteenth century can speak to issues relevant to the twenty-first-century Western world, given that the text, the *Spiritual Exercises* of St Ignatius of Loyola, remains a popular classic of Christian spirituality; but the juxtaposition of the two statements above suggests how very pertinent, indeed pointed, that conversation can be. Notwithstanding the demands of a historical context and political world-view very different from those of today, coupled with the challenges of a text which, by the nature of its structure and style, is difficult to read, the *Spiritual Exercises* nevertheless provides a framework for personal transformation which has endured for centuries.

While it is the framework and method—the exercises themselves—that form the focus of any practical application of the *Spiritual Exercises*, the theology that underpins the text is also of primary significance. I argue here that the theology of the human person which informs and

¹ Neil Kramer, *The Unfoldment: The Organic Path to Clarity, Power and Transformation* (Pompton Plains: Career, 2012), 129.

shapes the Spiritual Exercises is directly antithetical to the anthropology of much popular postmodern spirituality.

Both have an experiential focus, yet while the latter promises enlightenment and fulfilment through ‘practices of authenticity’ and the exercise of spiritual autonomy, the freedom it delivers can turn out to be a superficial veneer covering a self-indulgent narcissism. Conversely, the theology of the Spiritual Exercises might seem to limit the freedom of the individual, designated firmly as a creature serving the Creator, but it is through embracing this identity, as mediated by the practices and disciplines Ignatius prescribes, that genuine freedom can be found.

As the theologian Edouard Pousset contends:

Man’s relationship to the Creator does not entail a dependence which would alienate man from himself, as so many moderns imagine it. On the contrary, this relationship generates life and freedom for every person who abides in life and freedom.²

Pousset’s comments about alienation prompt us to remember, at this early stage, that Ignatius’ views of freedom are heavily influenced by Augustine. Augustine’s theology of primal freedom asserts that the fulfilling of God’s will results in true freedom because our *de facto* natural orientation is towards God. It is impossible for right relationship to result in alienation; rather this is the result of a falling away from right relationship. So, ‘our fall is evil because it is a reversal of the natural order, since it proceeds from the highest level to the lower’.³ The first evil will of man, which precedes all evil acts, is ‘a falling away from the work of God to his own works’, which results in bondage and the loss of freedom.⁴

The Spirituality Revolution

The ‘spirituality revolution’—a shift within Western culture from the acceptance of traditional religious expressions to the embrace of diverse and manifold new explorations of spirituality—is well documented.⁵ Stemming from the New Age movement of the 1970s, it has been characterized by

² Edouard Pousset, *Life in Faith and Freedom: An Essay Presenting Gaston Fessard’s Analysis of the Dialectic of the Spiritual Exercises of St Ignatius* (St Louis: Institute of Jesuit Sources, 1980), 17.

³ Augustine, *City of God*, 12. 8, in *The Later Christian Fathers: A Selection from the Writings of the Fathers from St Cyril of Jerusalem to St Leo the Great*, edited and translated by Henry Bettenson (London: OUP, 1970), 195.

⁴ Augustine, *City of God*, 14. 2.

⁵ See David Tacey, *The Spirituality Revolution: The Emergence of Contemporary Spirituality* (London: Routledge, 2004); Paul Heelas and Linda Woodhead, *The Spiritual Revolution: Why Religion Is Giving Way to Spirituality* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2005).



an explosion of holistic ‘mind–body–spirit’ beliefs and practices promising enlightenment and peace. These have often been denounced by the religious traditions, which point to the danger of ‘spiritual consumerism’ and the fickleness of a ‘pick-and-mix spiritual marketplace’.⁶

That there is plurality in the spiritual arena is simply a fact of life in the twenty-first-century Western world. This is, as David Tacey points out, the era of diversity: a complex and fragmented world in which people find themselves needing to ‘piece together the puzzle of their lives and sacred reality’.⁷ Why should inquiring seekers not cast about for that which they find to be personally uplifting and affirming? After all, are we not all precious and unique individuals in the sight of God? But therein lies the problem.

The turn of contemporary spirituality has been inward, resulting in expressions which are often highly individualistic and egotistical. It is doubtless the case that the growth (and attraction) of these has been fed by the major cultural shift described by Charles Taylor as ‘the subjective turn’.⁸ The development of consumerism in the West has commodified Romantic expressive individualism:

... the ... belief that every person has his own individuality, and that life consists in discovering and realising this authentic and unique

⁶ Gregg Lahood, ‘Relational Spirituality, Part 1. Paradise Unbound: Cosmic Hybridity and Spiritual Narcissism in the “One Truth” of New Age Transpersonalism’, *International Journal of Transpersonal Studies*, 29/1 (2010), 31–57, here 40.

⁷ Tacey, *Spirituality Revolution*, 44.

⁸ Charles Taylor, *The Ethics of Authenticity* (Cambridge, Ma: Harvard UP, 2003 [1991]), 26.

identity, rather than in conforming to normative models imposed from without by society, namely from political and religious authorities.⁹

At best this contemporary focus on the individual can result in self-indulgent, if unselfconscious, narcissism; and at worst it traps us in a ‘cocoon’ resulting in ‘despair, depression and frustration’.¹⁰

The Spiritual Exercises

What, by contrast, does Ignatius have to say about the human person, and what are the implications of his insights for life today? Roger Haight notes that Ignatius’ *Spiritual Exercises* begins by addressing the abiding questions of spiritual seekers in any age: ‘Who am I? Why am I here? Does some larger purpose underlie being itself and human existence? Is it realistically possible in our age to imagine or formulate a comprehensive vision of reality?’¹¹ In this sense, Ignatius had what many reflective people today do not possess: a sure foundation on which to build.

It is in the Principle and Foundation, indeed, that Ignatius expounds his anthropology most clearly and succinctly, setting out the world-view against which everything else in the *Spiritual Exercises* should be understood. The official *Directory* to the Exercises of 1599 refers to it as ‘the basis of the whole moral and spiritual edifice’.¹² The human being, explains Ignatius, is a created thing whose existence only makes sense in relationship with the Creator. It is this relationship that gives the individual meaning and purpose, and provides a way of navigating successfully the relationships that the creature will have with other created things.

It is notable that, in an age when the individual person was of little value and viewed primarily as a member of society or a community, Ignatius affirmed throughout the *Spiritual Exercises* the importance of the individual’s relationship with God expressed through personal experience: memory, understanding and will; consolation and desolation. However, while the *Spiritual Exercises* begins with the human person, he or she does not exist in isolation as the centre of a universe around which all else revolves. It is God who is the centre and the one for whose praise and loving service human beings were created.

⁹ François Gauthier, Tuomas Martikainen and Linda Woodhead, ‘Acknowledging a Global Shift: A Primer for Thinking about Religion in Consumer Societies’, *Implicit Religion*, 16/3 (2013), 261–276, here 271.

¹⁰ Tacey, *Spirituality Revolution*, 148.

¹¹ Roger Haight, *Christian Spirituality for Seekers: Reflections on the Spiritual Exercises of Ignatius Loyola* (New York: Orbis, 2012), 102.

¹² Dir. 12. 1.

The Centre of the Universe

Understanding the end for which human beings and the universe exist is sufficiently fundamental to have been called ‘the foundation of the Foundation’.¹³ However, while understanding and defining one’s identity in relation to the divine in this way is axiomatic to the Exercises, it is antithetical to much contemporary spirituality. Why not, rather, inhabit a universe of your own making in which you are sovereign and in which other created things praise, reverence and serve your ego?

The idea of spiritual autonomy stems from a notion of complete independence: the self in isolation is the source and end of all things, and sufficient for its own enlightenment and salvation. However, for Ignatius, the human person is always considered within the context of relationships. James Hanvey comments:

We are never allowed to stand outside these relationships on our own; there is no sovereign self, exercising a contemplative grasp of the whole from some vantage point outside the material, historical and existential process of life.¹⁴

Understanding his or her status as a creature automatically places the individual in right relationship with God. It is the Creator who is sovereign and creatures are able to understand who they are and the ‘end’ for which they exist within this context.

Moreover, it is not simply that human beings have been created by God for a particular purpose in the past; creation is ongoing:

We are being created momentarily by our God and Lord in all concrete particulars and that we are listening to God’s summons into life when we let ourselves hear our most authentic desires, which rise out of God’s passionate, creative love in us.¹⁵

This makes it clear that our very existence is completely contingent on God’s love and mercy, from moment to moment. As such, our identity cannot be grounded in the self, but must be found in relationship with the Creator (or, as Paul has said, ‘hidden with Christ in God’; Colossians 3: 3).

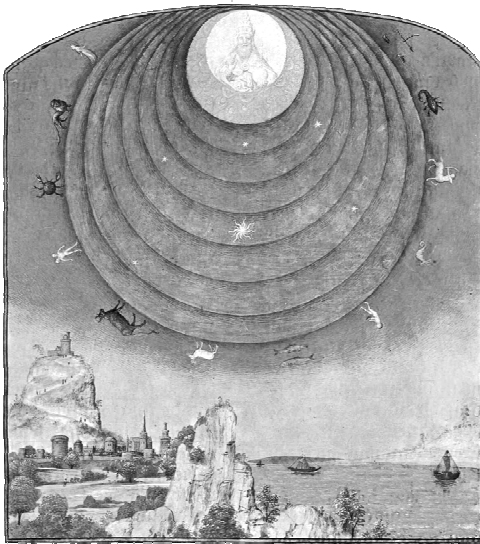
¹³ Michael Ivens, *Understanding the Spiritual Exercises* (Leominster: Gracewing, 1998), 26.

¹⁴ James Hanvey, ‘Ignatius of Loyola: Theology as a Way of Living’, *Thinking Faith* (30 July 2010), at http://www.thinkingfaith.org/articles/20100730_1.htm.

¹⁵ Joseph A. Tetlow, ‘The *Fundamentum*: Creation in the Principle and Foundation’, *Studies in the Spirituality of Jesuits*, 21/4 (1989), 1–53, here 7.

Once this truth is grasped, the relationship with other created things can fall properly into place; that is, second place, next to the desire to choose what is ‘conducive to the end for which we were created’. The indifference to any other created thing or state of life, so characteristic of Ignatian spirituality, is the natural result of the individual’s profound understanding of who he or she is in relation to God and everything else that God has made. As Harvey Egan reflects, ‘the emphatically theocentric thrust of this meditation renders all created things relative’.¹⁶

Nevertheless, maintaining a theocentric rather than anthropocentric approach to the Principle and Foundation can be difficult even for experienced interpreters of the Spiritual Exercises, when they find themselves in a society which is inevitably orientated towards the self. In the ‘contemporary reading’ of the first line of Exx 23 given by the well-known Ignatian commentator David Fleming: ‘The goal of our life is to live with God forever. God who loves us gave us life. Our own response of love allows God’s life to flow into us without limit.’¹⁷ Here the centre and focus have shifted from God to the human person. Instead



A theocentric universe, from a thirteenth-century French book of hours

of human beings being created to love and serve God, the point of departure has become ‘our life’. Certainly, it is a life given by God, but there is a sense that we are central, with God considerably flowing into us. Notice, too, that though we love God in this interpretation, the full breadth of that notion, through praise, reverence and (significantly) service has been lost. It is a subtle shift, but not unusual in texts which move too far in paraphrase from Ignatius’ original language.

¹⁶ Harvey D. Egan, *The Spiritual Exercises and the Ignatian Mystical Horizon* (St Louis: Institute of Jesuit Sources, 1976), 67.

¹⁷ David L. Fleming, *Like the Lightning: The Dynamics of the Ignatian Exercises* (St Louis: Institute of Jesuit Sources, 2004), 27.

This point is made purely to emphasize the significance of grasping the relationship between creature and Creator in the Spiritual Exercises, and the extent to which it opposes the contemporary zeitgeist. To moderate or undermine it risks misunderstanding the theology of the human person in Ignatius, which is the first building block of the Spiritual Exercises, upon which all other assumptions, arguments and practices rest. If this is not grasped then his subsequent comments about indifference, humility, freedom and *kenosis* will not make sense.

Of course, internalising this principle is not the work of a moment, and a number of Ignatius' exercises assist in driving the point home, specifically the Two Standards (Exx 136), Three Classes of Men (Exx 149) and Three Kinds of Humility (Exx 165). It is not a coincidence that, directly following the meditation on the Principle and Foundation, the exercitant is plunged into the First Week of the Exercises, which focuses on sin. Again, this helps to set the individual in right relationship to God and to society.

Sin is not a subject beloved of contemporary spirituality; indeed in many of its expressions sin does not really exist, all actions are relative and there is no objective good or evil. While Ignatius' language of Lucifer, Satan and 'the enemy of human nature' may be alienating in its medieval tone, the recognition and naming of sin, as a problem to be owned and repented by the creature and dealt with by the Creator, once again emphasizes relationship rather than a narcissistic understanding of the human person, in 'an engagement with the "mysterium iniquitatis" that cannot be reduced to a projection of our own subjective woundedness'.¹⁸

The Principle and Foundation concludes with the advice that 'we ought to desire and choose only that which is more conducive to the end for which we are created', drawing together the key elements of our creation and purpose with the *choices* made in this life. Ignatius takes for granted that an understanding of who we are before God brings the individual face to face with the question of how to live in the world. For him, life is to be lived after the pattern of Christ and as a companion of Christ, whose own life is explored through the meditations of the Second Week.

Desiring and Choosing

Introduced by the challenge presented in the Call of the King (Exx 91), the Second Week provides the material and moment for a life choice,

¹⁸ Hanvey, 'Ignatius of Loyola'.

or *election*, to be made. Ignatius provides clear direction on when and how this is to be approached (Exx 163); it is a central part of making the Spiritual Exercises which, through the work undertaken on our desires, moves us towards union with God. It is interesting to note the contribution that Ignatius thus makes to a fully rounded understanding of freedom and choice, subjects beloved of postmodern spirituality.

For the freedom of self-determination and the ability to choose according to one's own desires are key to the self-understanding and *modus operandi* of the contemporary sovereign self. The same word, *freedom*, is used to describe completely opposite states of being in Ignatian and New Age spiritualities and, ironically, the means to achieve both is choice. The freedom of individuals to do as they choose (so long as no one else is being harmed) is an inviolable principle in new spiritualities, commodified in the rights of the consumer, but also closely allied to the notion of personal uniqueness: 'To live "out" one's unique life, to be "true to oneself", means finding the freedom, the autonomy, to be oneself, to become oneself, to "turn" into oneself, to live one's life to the full'.¹⁹

The Ignatian understanding of freedom is a reversal of this position. At the beginning of the Exercises personal freedom is to be surrendered: the exercitant is advised to offer up his or her 'entire will and liberty' (Exx 5) to enable God to work fully in accordance with God's will. The Principle and Foundation encourages an indifference to created things and states of life in order for the freedom to make a right choice to be cultivated. Now, at the moment of election, the exercitant is reminded again of the connection between choice, freedom and the end for which he or she was created. Any and all choices are governed by this end: the praise and service of God (Exx 169).

It is an outworking of a fundamental truth of the gospel that a life laid down is a life received back; a seed that dies is a seed which fruits to life. Freedom freely relinquished results in life in all its fullness because the freedom that serves the personal ego is subsumed by the freedom that serves the end for which the individual was created. The process of election, then, is a dialogue between our freedom as human beings and God's freedom. When our choice is for God, our freedom is affirmed and expanded rather than diminished. We receive the gift of a freedom from attachment to any created thing, which is the expansiveness of God's freedom.

¹⁹ Paul Heelas, *Spiritualities of Life: New Age Romanticism and Consumptive Capitalism* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2008), 38.

This results in a uniting of wills which is liberating rather than constricting precisely because the creature has chosen to embrace the end for which he or she was created. Experience shows that election cannot happen unless a retreatant has the courage to desire great things and to ask for them; when the election springs forth, it is like the birth of a new freedom. In this freedom, this use of the will, the individual has accepted God's transforming gift within his or her own will. The person's freedom has been liberated so as to choose in true freedom, in other words in covenant relationship. It is precisely in the will that he or she is united with God.²⁰

A uniting of wills which is liberating rather than constricting

Self-Giving Love

In the final meditation, the *Contemplatio* (Exx 230–237), all these threads—identity, freedom and choice, desire and possession—are drawn together in the prayer of offering, the *Suscipe*. The very word 'take' poses a challenge to a spiritual materialism, which is acquisitive in character. In offering to God memory, liberty, understanding and will, all that is quintessentially 'me, myself, I' is let go; I am drawn into an act of *kenosis* which is, by its very nature, the opposite of narcissism. However, contrary to the fear that the individual will disappear completely, subsumed into God, this radical alignment of wills involves an exchange which subsequently shapes and characterizes the life of the one making the offer: God's love and grace are received in return. This is a prayer of self-giving that is entirely modelled on the perichoretic relationship between Father, Son and Holy Spirit—the continual pouring out and receiving of love, one to another. It is for this reason that the *Suscipe* can be seen to be both the means of Ignatian mystagogy and the basis for engagement with the world. It is a 'drawing in' that leads to 'sending out': from *circumincessio* to *missio*.

This suggests a further, serious critique of many forms of new age spirituality, which are not only self-aggrandising but also self-serving. The focus on the self is the perfect distraction, resulting in an inability to care for others, as all a person's energy is expended on nurturing his or her own being. Such spiritualities do not have the capacity to reach out to the other; they cannot self-empty because they work by 'self-filling' spiritual consumers. Closely allied to this is a reluctance, and a lack of resources, to deal with suffering. David Tacey writes:

²⁰ Sylvie Robert, 'Union with God in the Ignatian Election', *The Way Supplement*, 103 (2002), 100–112, at 107.

True spirituality is not something that makes itself available to our egotistical designs, but rather something that draws us into a larger world and makes us subordinate to a greater will that transcends us on all sides. The credo of true spirituality could be the words of Jesus uttered in despair in the Garden of Gethsemane before the crucifixion, 'Nevertheless, not my will but thy will be done' (Matthew 26:39; Luke 22:42) Not 'follow your bliss', but 'thy will be done' is the credo for authentic spirituality.²¹

He argues that those who subscribe to the myth of individualism are often dismayed on discovering that the natural action of the Spirit found within is to lead the person outwards, beyond subjectivity, to engage with the world.

The narcissistic idea of private spirituality becomes shattered by the spirit as soon as it is awakened. Private spirituality is revealed as an illusion or as a transitional stage between a former state of sleep and a future mission of social responsibility and commitment.²²

This line of thought is entirely congruent with the Ignatian charism which, rather than eschewing suffering, seeks it out as a means of closer connection with Christ. The desire of Ignatius voiced in the prayer to Mary to 'put him with her Son' (*Autobiography*, n.60) is a thread woven through the whole of the Spiritual Exercises. It is a prayer to enter into and share Christ's life of poverty, insults and humility, set forth in the Two Standards (Exx 136), and to participate in his passion during the Third Week. The exercitant is prepared for this discomfort by the meditations of the First Week, which focus on sin and the individual's part in the suffering it causes, and the continual praying of the *Anima Christi* throughout the thirty days as a petition to the crucified Christ, in whose wounds we not only hide but also participate.²³

Finally, the *Contemplatio* is rooted, from the outset, in the movement outwards through love of the other as it focuses on the divine outpouring of gifts, life and labour. This is the love that manifests itself 'more by deeds than by words', consisting in 'a mutual communication' (Exx 230–231); it therefore cannot exist within a cocoon, but must always look outwards, forming the foundation of service. It is, for Ignatius, self-evident that

²¹ Tacey, *Spirituality Revolution*, 146.

²² Tacey, *Spirituality Revolution*, 148.

²³ Not only expected as part of the triple colloquy, but one of the 'ordinary daily prayers' (Louis J. Puhl, *The Spiritual Exercises of St Ignatius* [Chicago: Loyola, 1951], 162).

we cannot enjoy the bliss of the *Contemplatio* without having first endured the pain of the passion, yet even in that bliss we are being poured out for others after the pattern of Christ. The *kenosis* of the *Suscipe* is the outworking of the prayer *place me with your Son*, for in that pouring out we are entirely united with Christ in his act of giving himself for the world. This is the union that Ignatius envisages which, though both mystical and joyful, is a far cry from the triumphant self-fulfilment of the sovereign self.

Tim Muldoon reflects that Ignatian spirituality should naturally speak to the postmodern generation because ‘it is based on a personal imaginative exploration of the gospel, and it invites people to choose freely to deepen their intimacy with God through a deepened understanding of who they themselves are’.²⁴ Indeed, in many ways undertaking the Spiritual Exercises might be extremely attractive to contemporary spiritual seekers set on a spot of navel gazing: it really is thirty days of thinking ‘all about me’. But here is the irony. In turning inwards to God one finds that one is turned back out again to the world that God created through love. Instead of operating as a solitary sovereign self seeking personal spiritual well-being, the individual joins the community of those who consider themselves companions of Jesus, engaged in his loving and healing work in the world; realising that, in and through this work, they will draw closer to God and find fulfilment in serving the end for which they have been created. Or, as Jesus put it rather more succinctly, ‘those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake will find it’ (Matthew 16:25).

Helen Orchard is team vicar of St Matthew’s Church in the Wimbledon team ministry.

²⁴ Tim Muldoon, ‘Postmodern Spirituality and the Ignatian *Fundamentum*’, *The Way*, 44/1 (January 2005), 88–100, here 96.