

SOME POLITICAL AND CULTURAL IMPLICATIONS OF THE *SPIRITUAL EXERCISES*

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WE DO NOT NORMALLY THINK of the *Spiritual Exercises* of St Ignatius as a political text. Yet Quentin Skinner, a Cambridge historian of political ideas, usefully and insightfully reminds us that key political texts are also interventions in the politics of their time. They have a ‘performativity’, they are ‘doing something as well as saying something’, which makes them generative in political discourse long after their composition.¹ We can see this with the seminal secular texts of Hobbes, Locke, Rousseau, Hegel or Marx. In the same way, the principal scriptures of Judaeo-Christianity have remained a constant source of political as well as theological discourse, shaping ancient as well as contemporary culture.²

The *Spiritual Exercises* ranks as one of the great classics among the spiritual texts of early modern Catholicism, but it is not a politically innocent one. Although it develops from the primary experience of Ignatius at Manresa, it is also marked by the different religious and political circumstances of his time which influenced its language and constructions. It is not difficult to find traces of this in the formulation of the Call of the King and the Two Standards. Not only do these draw upon scriptural eschatological imagery, but they are also clearly marked by memory of the medieval courtly heraldic ideal and the crusades against the ‘infidel’ to recover Spain for Christianity.

The more subtle religious and ecclesiastical ‘political’ dimension of the text is Ignatius’ careful and persistent attention to anything that

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¹ Quentin Skinner, *Visions of Politics*, volume 1, *Regarding Method* (Cambridge: Cambridge U, 2002), 106.

² See N. T. Wright’s essay on Paul and empire in *The Blackwell Companion to Paul*, edited by Stephen Westerhold (Oxford: John Wiley, 2011); also Krister Stendahl and Richard A. Horsley, *Paul and Politics: Ekklesia, Israel, Imperium, Interpretation. Essays in Honor of Krister Stendahl* (Harrisburg: Trinity, 2000).

might support the charge of Illuminism.³ There is also the later introduction of the 'Rules for Thinking with the Church' and perhaps the most radical premise of all: 'that God deals directly with the human person' which, in the highly charged situation of a growing Protestant Reformation, could be interpreted as dispensing with priests and the sacramental mediation of the Church.

The *Spiritual Exercises* is neither a neutral nor a purely private spiritual text. The Exercises actively work to re-order desires and values leading to the experience of the *Contemplatio*. They contain a powerful vision of the world as a *theatrum gloria Dei*. The text itself aims at the transformation of human agency and, therefore, it aims to shape political and social agency as well. In more recent times, the work of Ignacio Ellacuría, especially his notes on the historico-politico dimension of the *Spiritual Exercises*, brings this dimension to the fore.⁴

My aim here is twofold: to explore how the *Spiritual Exercises* are significant for our social and cultural agency and can serve as a basis for judging political and cultural systems; and also to suggest that we do the Exercises a disservice if we confine them purely to the growth of an individual spiritual subject. They certainly are intended for conversion and the development of spiritual freedom, but they also intend that this freedom be placed at the disposal of God's salvific purpose. In so far as the Exercises always direct us to an encounter with a God 'working in all things', they do not allow us to flee from the world. Rather, they encourage us to become active apostles of Christ and his Kingdom within it. The Exercises do not propose any particular political or social system, but offer us a way of discerning the principles and values that should guide our actions and the means that best serve us and our neighbour to attain our ends.

The two places where the text of the *Spiritual Exercises* most directly and economically illustrates this are the Principle and Foundation, which

³ See Moshe Sluhovsky, 'St Ignatius of Loyola's Spiritual Exercises and Their Contribution to Modern Introspective Subjectivity', *The Catholic Historical Review*, 99/4 (2013). Sluhovsky argues that Ignatius introduced a number of technical changes to the late medieval tradition of undertaking spiritual exercises which significantly widened the retreatant's control over his or her spiritual growth and the access of the laity to spiritual exercises and introspective techniques. However, this 'democratizing impulse' also ignited questions among conservative theologians who saw resemblances between Ignatius' Spiritual Exercises and *alumbradismo*. This led to a dramatic curtailment of the Exercises' 'democratic' potential in the last years of the sixteenth century.

⁴ See Ignacio Ellacuría, 'A Latin American Reading of the *Spiritual Exercises* of Saint Ignatius', translated by J. Matthew Ashley, *Spiritus*, 10/2 (2010), 205–242; also Ashley's article on the translation in the same issue of *Spiritus*, 'A Contemplative under the Standard of Christ'.

represents the recovery of the self and the ordering of our freedom, and the Two Standards, with its unmasking of the strategies of Evil. I argue that they cannot be separated from the cross (Third Week), which grounds the counter-strategy of a redeemed, cruciform freedom. What distinguishes this from the freedom recovered through the grace of the crucified Christ in the First Week is that it is the expression of christological freedom realised in obedience and abandonment to the Divine salvific will. It is an active freedom in history which has redemptive power.

The Principle and Foundation: The Gift of Discerning Freedom

Although the Principle and Foundation came to be formulated later in the evolution of the Exercises, there is no doubt that it is central to their whole dynamic.⁵ Not only does it act as a fundamental orientation and measure of freedom at the beginning, but it is also part of the purification of desire expressed in the preparatory prayer of every exercise. Indeed, the formula that ‘all my intentions, actions and operations may be ordered purely to the praise and reverence of the Divine Majesty’ (Exx 46) is a prayer which describes a whole life. It constitutes an act of praise realised in our purified and liberated freedom, expressed in and through the service of humanity and of creation. It captures the soteriological doxology of Christ’s person and life which the graced life of the Holy Spirit realised in us.⁶

Three important features of the Principle and Foundation are relevant here. First, the human subject is set within a relationship to God which defines the origin and telos of a human life. It is a relationship in which all other goods are relativised in the light of this supreme good: ‘to praise, reverence and serve God our Lord, and by this means to save his soul’. Secondly, the Principle and Foundation establishes the criterion by which we can judge our proper use of these goods ‘in so far as they help’ towards our end. This is also the measure of our freedom in relation to all created things and to God. Third, The Principle and Foundation effectively maps the drama of our personal history which can also be expanded to frame all human history.

⁵ See Santiago Arzubialde, *Ejercicios espirituales de S. Ignacio. Historia y análisis*, 2nd edn (Santander: Sal Terrae, 2009), 111–124.

⁶ Compare Ellacuría, ‘Latin American Reading of the *Spiritual Exercises* of Saint Ignatius’, 212, arguing against the spiritualist, voluntarist and materialist reading to ground the Principle and Foundation in the salvific work of Christ.

Relationship to God

The Principle and Foundation sets out the whole purpose of the Exercises upon which the exercitant is about to embark. It marks a central locus in grasping the subtle interplay between nature and grace: human freedom, its finite condition and desires, and God's salvific will at work, not only in each individual, but within the sweep of history itself. It serves to interrogate the understanding we have of our freedom and how it is exercised. It also alerts us to the intimate relationship between the self and freedom. It pushes us to a deeper reflection on the desires that motivate us and direct our agency, both those we might rationally and publicly profess and those that are not so readily (or willingly) recognised.

The Principle and Foundation presents us with a challenging clarity: if we truly desire the end proposed, we will enter into the school of the Exercises. We will allow ourselves to be taught by God so as to receive the gift of a loving freedom to serve in any state to which we are called. Ignatius describes this freedom as 'indifference'. This does not mean neutrality or lack of commitment; rather, it is a freedom from disordered desires and readiness for whatever might be asked of us to God's glory and the help of our neighbour. This 'indifference', which is actually a love of God in and above all things, is the condition for discerning.

The Principle and Foundation is a universal principle in the sense that it is operative whatever our circumstances, status or abilities. The freedom which it puts before us is *sola Dei gloria*, and this will relativise all political and social claims to which we may be either attracted or subject. It places them in a new framework of value.

Freedom and Created Things

It would be a mistake to think that the Principle and Foundation proposes a purely instrumental 'use' of created things. Rather, it is inviting us to attend to their proper use, which entails an appreciation of their own intrinsic value. It is a refusal to idealize or fetishise them as sources of our lasting happiness, which would be instrumentalising. The world is *given*—both in the sense of 'being there' and in the sense of gift. To inhabit it and use it well is to live conscious of our relational dependence, which refuses to make the world into some sort of god or exploit its givenness as a resource which entails no responsibilities.

Our epistemological, moral and spiritual task is to see and respond to creation in its own proper order. This entails an obligation to understand, respect and value the created order in its own right, as possessing its



Adam Naming the Animals, from a late thirteenth-century bestiary

own telos and worth which cannot be reduced to our need or use. *Gaudium et spes* captures this well when it says, 'For by the very circumstance of their having been created, all things are endowed with their own stability, truth, goodness, proper laws and order' (n.36).⁷ Creation has its own intrinsic goodness and this imposes obligations upon us; we have a moral relationship to all created things.⁸

When we consider the role creation plays in the Spiritual Exercises, especially in the First Week (Exx 55) and the *Contemplatio* (Exx 230), we see it has a soteriological purpose. If creation is the enduring witness of God's providential love for us, witnessing to it even while we continue to reject it through our sinfulness then, in some way, creation participates in our destiny. Creation remains an enduring reason for an outpouring of our gratitude.

In this context, gratitude is more than thankfulness. It is the dynamic dilation of the whole self in openness to creation and its Creator. It heightens our awareness of our relationality, which takes active expression in generosity: the disposition of the self to the care and service of the other. When the soul is flooded with gratitude, not only is it more open to God, but it is disposed to the Divine will. Gratitude

⁷ This is part of an argument for the proper autonomy of scientific investigation on the one hand, and the harmony between science and faith on the other.

⁸ In this regard, our care of creation is to imitate the Creator, which extends beyond a narrow sense of stewardship as conservation and preservation. For a fuller discussion, see Willis Jenkins, *Ecologies of Grace: Environmental Ethics and Christian Theology* (Oxford: Oxford U, 2008).

points us towards the sanctifying dimension of mission which every Christian has with regard to creation.⁹ Although it is beyond my scope here to explore the ecological implications of this vision contained within the Spiritual Exercises, we can begin to see the radical personal, political and economic outcomes that such a vision will entail.

Personal History and Salvation History

The Principle and Foundation locates us as active selves participating in a network of developing and intersecting relationships, but its sparse, succinct, 'scholastic' language can easily hide its multidimensionality and the process of conversion and transformation that it describes. Our relationship with God and with others, which takes place within the whole created order of the finite, can conceal the deeper dynamic which marks all our relationships. The individual's personal encounter with Christ is always central; this dynamic, in which and through which our lives are played out, takes place both in the transcendent reality of the salvific activity of the Triune life and in the imminent realities of our 'now' or our 'situatedness'.

As the Exercises progress, the self becomes transparent to itself in the course of loving God which, for Ignatius, is always expressed in the desire for ever greater service. This is the movement articulated by St Paul in 1 Corinthians 13: 12—'Now I know only in part; then I will know fully, even as I have been fully known'—and it is both noetic and affective. The Exercises do not know a Cartesian autonomous self or self-knowledge: the self is always a self-in-relation. This, too, has its own characteristic knowledge, for the self knows itself in so much as it knows how much it is in need of redemption. Hence, the deeper this awareness, the more we see that Christ is integral to our existence and self-understanding: our knowledge of self will depend on our knowledge of Christ.

In knowing Christ, we cannot separate the cognitive from the affective. As in John's Gospel, knowledge of Christ comes through love. Indeed, the more we love Christ, the more we know Him and our world through His love. Here, the Exercises lead us into the central mystery of revelation: all Christian gnosis comes by way of the cross. 'Conversion', which is the process by which we appropriate this gnosis, is a recovery

⁹ 'Stewardship' has now become a contested term in ecological discourse. Within scripture, stewardship is not domination or subjection but the ways in which humans are called upon to imitate the Divine stewardship of care. See James Hanvey, 'Laudato si' and the Renewal of Theologies of Creation', *Heythrop Journal*, 59/6 (2018), 1022–1035.

and reordering or reconstruction (conversion) of the self. Just as there is no distinction in Christ between His person and His mission, so the Exercises gradually re-form us in the grace of Christ-like integrity. Hence, we will experience a desire to participate in His mission of establishing the Kingdom of God and be drawn into it—we become both elected and electing. Thus the experience of our desire is coordinated with our freedom, which is the work of grace. If we genuinely love Christ and seek our own salvation, we cannot avoid history or society. Indeed, we are firmly located in and committed to the salvific good of all creation. We are reconstituted in Christ as soteriological agents, whose agency is worked out in the unpredictability of times, places and circumstances. For this reason, *discernment* is integral to our graced freedom and agency.

The ‘self’ that emerges from the Exercises has discovered that ‘to praise, reverence and serve’ are not only active verbs that apply at the individual level, but they encompass the whole Divine purpose of ‘working the redemption of the human race’ (Exx 107). The relationship with all created things, established in the Principle and Foundation, is disclosed as mission. We come to see that the way of our salvation, and of becoming more completely who we are, must be through Christ and the service of others; through working for the salvation of the other, we enact the freedom of our graced self. It is now possible to see that the whole dynamic of the Principle and Foundation, which leads us into the mystery of Christ and whose end cannot be realised without him, will have significant cultural and political consequences in practice.

The Political Implications of the Principle and Foundation

The location of the self in both transcendent relationships and temporal relationships with all created things means that St Ignatius recovers two vital dimensions for our understanding of the human person and his or her agency. In this respect, the Exercises represent an authentic Christian anthropology in which the person lives in a relational transcendence to God which is foundational for an imminent relationship with all other things. This holds our relationship with human society and creation in their most dynamic and creative order, while forming a barrier to any reductionism.

Every political, economic and social system contains its own anthropology. Policies, structures and decisions express values; implicitly or explicitly they put forward a vision of the human telos, whether that be expressed in the pursuit of happiness and self-fulfilment or as service to the greater destiny of the state or the system. But neither the

state nor the law (national or international) has the stability to be a keeper of the human soul, for neither has any intrinsic commitment to transcendence. Transcendence, which grounds the non-reducibility of the human person and human freedom, can still be seen even in the secular world, or where God is not explicitly acknowledged and may even be denied. It is exercised as conscience, which is respected even when it is seen as dangerous or inconvenient.

Where humans are understood purely in material terms, not only is their moral responsibility to all created things compromised, but they themselves are exposed to instrumentalisation. Value becomes determined by use and utility; in turn, this becomes subject to political, economic and social power, now liberated from any responsibility to 'the human'. The most egregious examples of this can be seen with slavery and in the creation of classes and castes, which then determine access to legal protection and rights—or their denial. Narratives are developed to legitimate these creations and dehumanise people placed in categories which diminish or erase their humanity but facilitate their subjection to the state or the power-class. We can see this happening in history, especially through the dynamics of colonisation and empire, but it continues today with the Rohingyas, Yazidis, Uyghurs, indigenous peoples and Tribals. Instrumentalisation and reductionism can also take place within societies where particular identities—sexual, social, economic, cultural—can be renarrated so as to degrade their value and make violence or policies of elimination appear necessary and virtuous.

For the Ignatian Exercises, the ultimate guarantor of humanity is the absoluteness of God. Christianity not only maintains the absolute transcendence of trinitarian monotheism but, with the incarnation of Christ, it refuses to allow this to be used to diminish or degrade the value of the human person. God's absolute transcendence marks the boundary between the finite and infinite, and the relation between the two natures in Christ is a paradigm for the way in which the finite (human) is realised in its relationship to the Divine.

God's decision to create that which is not God and, even more radically, to be involved in the history of creation opens up the distinctiveness of the Judaeo-Christian faith. It embeds human freedom in the Divine freedom and preserves the experience of God as liberator not oppressor. This radical freedom of God—which is God's own aseity and transcendence—ultimately subverts any attempts to co-opt God as a product of the state or dominant power group. The whole of the Hebrew

scriptures and the New Testament bear witness to this. The Principle and Foundation is a condensed statement of this history in which it is grounded. In stating the transcendent purpose of the human person, it relativises all other claims. Consequently, the order expressed in the Principle and Foundation ensures the proper disposition of relations between the person and the community, the community and the state.

It also reminds us that we belong to God and are of infinite value to God, a value which is realised and secured in Christ. This transcendent value and, indeed, the transcendent destiny of our whole self (material, spiritual, historical) is realised in Christ's resurrection. We should understand the telos described in the Principle and Foundation as containing an eschatology. If the Principle and Foundation encapsulates the radical nature of the person's transcendent value, it also articulates his or her dependence: first upon God and then upon the community and the whole of creation. It not only characterizes our freedom but entails responsibilities; we are responsible for the good of the other and assisting the other's movement towards God. In this, it opens the way to the central insight of the Christian tradition on the primacy of 'charity'.

Responsibility likewise lies with the community and the state. In ways appropriate to each, there is a commitment to respect the intrinsic transcendent value of each person, whatever his or her status or condition. Equally, there is also a commitment to provide the resources for persons to realise their dignity and their own mission for the greater good. We discover and express the dynamic goodness within us, healed by grace, to be a self-gift to the other. It is in this context that we can understand how discernment is not only necessary for spiritual growth but must become a habitual practice in the exercise of our freedom, especially in our relationships, so that their growth in goodness may become an unfolding dynamic of Christ's indwelling through the action of the Holy Spirit, 'to gather up all things in Him' (Ephesians 1:10).

Autonomy as the unrestricted and independent exercise of personal will has become deeply embedded in Western culture. The 'redemption' or 'healing' of freedom in the Exercises as the praxis of life in Christ just outlined will also act as a critique of the dominant contemporary equation of freedom with autonomy.¹⁰ In many ways 'autonomy' represents

¹⁰ For an extensive discussion of the relationship between freedom and discernment within the theology of liberation and doxology, see Andrew L. Prevot, *Thinking Prayer: Theology and Spirituality amid the Crises of Modernity* (Notre Dame: Notre Dame U, 2015), especially chapter 5.

a rebellion against or denial of our finitude. As the alternative to this, the Principle and Foundation and the Exercises that follow firmly locate us within the finite. However, we come to understand that this does not diminish or restrict us. Rather, it becomes the realm in which we encounter our capacity for self-transcendence and self-gift in love, embracing the responsibilities we have to the other. Here, we begin to see that the incarnation opens the finite to the infinite life from which it draws and where it is established. Thus the finite becomes the condition (christological) of realising our potential for freedom. Not only does it serve our own flourishing but it is also generative of community, because it expresses the creative life-giving *communio* of the good in which we are now established. Freedom becomes self-transcending love-in-action, the Holy Spirit poured into our hearts.

A Journey in History

The Principle and Foundation envisages us exercising our freedom in love and gratitude towards God and all created things. Dependence is not seen as a restriction of our freedom but the condition of its perfection (think of the *Contemplatio*). This understanding of freedom has wide implications for all of our social, political and economic systems, especially when they purport to be the cause, guarantor and means of our autonomy, represented by their apparent ability to offer infinite capacity for choice.¹¹

The Exercises not only offer us a theological anthropology, but show us a way of living it. Ultimately, this is more significant than establishing a vision of humanity, no matter how coherent or appealing it may be. This is where praxis or life is always prior to theory and the vision emerges from the economy of grace in history rather than being an imposition from some other source. If it cannot be realised in history, it remains just one more noble edifice of human reason. It may include a vision of Christ but, if it is not incarnated into history, into the reality and practice of daily life, it will remain just an aesthetic hypothetical construct. Jesus Christ is not only a historical figure; He is a living presence in history, of which He is the Lord. Here we will always be appropriating the inexhaustible event of the resurrection. The resurrection means that history is the place of encounter, transformation and transfiguration.

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¹¹ See Joseph Veale, *Manifold Gifts: Ignatian Essays on Spirituality* (Oxford: Way Books, 2006), 169–170. All of these essays are worth reading.



The Mystical Body of Christ, by Marco Pino,
c. 1571

This is why the whole dynamic of the Exercises is a profound, transformational journey ‘in’ history, into which we are now sent as servant and companion of Christ who is already active within it.¹² It is also why we must never treat the Fourth Week as a sort of appendix, but must live from it.

The Christian life and the Christian community not only articulate this reality, but also present it in the court of human reason. By living it, they create a new space, a new possibility within history. This can only be real if it is sustained by the gift of Christ and the work of the Holy Spirit. When the Church lives from the Holy Spirit and the presence of the Risen Lord,

it and its members are empowered to realise the freedom that the Principle and Foundation describes. Such a graced freedom, which takes up the cause of the other and his or her dignity and hope, will always be a challenge for ideology—whatever form it may take or whatever security it may offer. This will be as true for religious ideologies as it is for secular and atheistic ones. The Christian life and the community of faith, the Church, which sustains it, are a space of creative hope where humanity comes to know its destiny and is empowered to live it.

If the graced experience of the Spiritual Exercises opens up this new possibility, it also places us at the heart of the drama and requires us to exercise the gift of discerning freedom that we have been given. The Exercises confront us with the ultimate reality of choice: are we for Christ, or not? They do not allow us the luxury of neutrality. This, too, is part of their theo-political character.

¹² Compare the dynamic of the Fourth Week and the *Contemplatio*, Exx 230 following.

The Two Standards: Unmasking the Strategies of Evil

The centrality of the Two Standards and Three Modes of Humility to the dynamic process of the Exercises is well recognised. They are also at the core of the primitive version of the Exercises, indicating their foundational nature in Ignatius' own experience at Manresa; they subsequently shaped the Exercises emerging from that experience.¹³ While these two meditations are certainly there to school the process of discernment and frame the election, they also become the principal tools for the life of service to which we are called. In so far as they shape our understanding of situations and guide our agency they have a political dimension. Here are some key elements.

Knowing and Living in Christ

We have seen how the Spiritual Exercises place us within the drama of history. If the principal grace of the First Week is the knowledge of how sin and evil can entangle us, the subsequent Weeks then take us into a profound and personal knowledge of how God acts to redeem us and the world. This brings us to our 'second conversion': conversion to the person and knowledge of Christ and His mission. We have already encountered Christ in our 'first conversion': knowledge of the abyss of sin in the world, both personal and cosmic, and our encounter with the crucified Christ who is also our redemption (Exx 53). Only in the experience and knowledge of the First Week can we enter into the second conversion of the Second and Third Weeks, which is the way of the crucified Christ.

If the experience of the First Week shows us that the goal of the Principle and Foundation is actually impossible without the salvific grace of the crucified Lord, then discernment, to be effective, must live in this knowledge. To read the world and history without the crucified and risen Christ risks making discernment into an exercise in theistic gnosis or atheistic self-construction: knowledge which may need experience and insight but not an encounter with the revelation of Jesus Christ.

For Ignatius, understanding or knowledge is never purely an intellectual enlightenment. It is a deeper and more complete 'knowing' which engages the affect or the heart; it is a sort of attunement to the

¹³ For the background to the 'Three Classes of Men' (Exx 149–157), see Arzubialde, *Ejercicios espirituales de S. Ignacio*, 401–416, and also Andreas Falkner, 'Nota sobre los binarios', in *Las fuentes de los ejercicios espirituales de San Ignacio. Actas de simposio internacional*, edited by Juan Plazaola (Bilbao: Mensajero, 1998).

person and way of Christ. In this way, our knowing becomes praxis. There is a complementarity between the activity of our reason and our affective or experiential knowledge. We can see this movement set out in the governing petition of the Second Week. It is formulated in the two verbs: *conocer* and *imitar*—to know and to imitate. In their respective ways, they are a knowledge by love and desire which begins first in interior reality and then takes shape in our actions.¹⁴

Through the contemplations of the Second Week, we are drawn into this experiential knowledge. *Imitar* is an integral part of this knowing. Christ is more than an exemplar to be imitated. Rather, the knowledge that is given is a participative knowledge; it entails the Pauline ‘Christ ... lives in me’ (Galatians 2:20). The exercises on the application of the senses serve to renew, sensitise and educate the faculties so that they are now not only open to the world in the normal way, but also open to it as the realm of God’s activity and Christ’s presence. Here, we recognise that one of the fruits of the Exercises is a profound epistemological healing and expansion: to see all things in Christ. Formally, this is the indwelling activity of the Holy Spirit through the growth and reordering of the energies of desire and love.

To be drawn into ever-deeper *conocimiento interno* of Christ is to be drawn into the whole salvific economy of the incarnation, its personal and historical unfolding. Not only is this experienced in the concrete life of Christ but, as the *Contemplatio* indicates, it is the ever-present activity of the divine triune love sustaining, redeeming and sanctifying throughout history—past, present and future. Whatever state of life we choose, following Christ can only be effective through total commitment. This will entail entering into the cruciform reality of His person—His mission *ad extra*, which is grounded *ad intra* in His obedience as Son to the Father and sealed through the Holy Spirit, ‘the Lord and Giver of Life’. The position of the Two Standards and Three Modes of Humility within the Second Week is important if this transformation is to be realised.

¹⁴ For a fuller exploration, see Arzubialde, *Ejercicios espirituales de S. Ignacio*, 347–354; for an informative, concise study, see Adolfo Chercoles, ‘Conocimiento interno’, *Diccionario de espiritualidad ignaciana*, edited by Pascual Cebollada and others (Bilbao and Santander: Mensajero and Sal Terrae, 2007), volume 1, 400–408. Ignacio Iparraguirre, *Vocabulario de ejercicios espirituales. Ensayo de hermenéutica ignaciana* (Rome: ARSI, 1972) is still useful. The entry in the *Diccionario* for *imitar* comes under ‘imitación de Cristo’ (volume 1, 994–100). This gives a useful summary of the tradition with which Ignatius would have been familiar in the devotional movements and teachings. However, it does not deal with the epistemological significance of *imitar* and the critical role it plays in the Two Standards.

The Battle for the Kingdom

At first glance, the presentation of the Two Standards can appear to have the same parabolic character as the Call of the Earthly King (Exx 91 following), but I think they belong to different genres.¹⁵ Although it presents us with a vivid imaginary scene, the imagery of the Two Standards is deeply rooted in scripture and tradition. The meditation opens for us the way in which the advent of Christ unmasks the activity of evil and its strategies. It locates, or relocates, us within the immediacy of the battle for the Kingdom. Those who wish to know and follow Christ will find themselves in a real conflict with the forces named in Ephesians as ‘rulers’ and ‘authorities’ (6:12). We cannot forget the knowledge of the First Week concerning the cosmic and supernatural ‘history’ of sin and evil.¹⁶ As the Gospels make clear, Christ is the unavoidable moment of decision, the moment of crisis which always has a historical and existential reality.

To treat the imagery of the Two Standards as some anachronistic device derived from the piety of a previous age that needs to be ‘demythologized’ risks dehistoricising the reality of the Kingdom and the conflict with evil. In doing so, we remove it from the realm of history to the purely personal and disincarnate realm of the ‘spiritual’. As Karl Barth argues:

To say ‘Jesus’ is necessarily to say ‘history’, his history, the history in which he is what he is and does what he does. In this history, we know God, and we know evil and their relationship the one to the other—but only from this source and in this way.¹⁷

In locating us, the Two Standards also becomes a school where we learn a practical and necessary *discretion*: the knowledge we need to serve Christ and stay true to him. Essentially, this is an apostolic wisdom. While ordered to our own personal growth in Christ, it is also about mission. Indeed, this is what we find in the way the synoptic Gospels present the inauguration of Jesus’ mission under the power of the Holy

¹⁵ Compare Arzubialde, *Ejercicios espirituales de S. Ignacio*, 395, who sees it as a parable.

¹⁶ We should note that, in doing so, the Two Standards recapitulates the ‘history’ of sin in the First Week, and runs through the same dimension: cosmic/supernatural to existential and personal. In this sense, ‘history’ is not simply a temporal category measured only in human terms.

¹⁷ Karl Barth, ‘Jesus Is the Victor’, in *Church Dogmatics*, volume 4, *The Doctrine of Reconciliation*, translated by G. W. Bromiley (Edinburgh: T. and T. Clark, 2009), 69. The whole discussion is instructive for the Two Standards.



Christus victor, mosaic, Ravenna, late fifth century

Spirit. After his baptism, he is immediately engaged in the trial or temptations of the 'Enemy'. The Two Standards likewise inaugurates and shapes our response to the call of Christ and to the unfolding of the Christian mission. Any mission that does not place itself within this eschatological drama will find it difficult to understand itself and its choices. In the Two Standards, the Exercises give us a 'weapon' to be wielded in Christ's service for the salvation of souls. They also show us that the only weapon is the cross.¹⁸

The Wisdom of the Cross and the Discernment of the Two Standards.

In this context, we can see how the drama of the Two Standards is the presupposition for the discernment of spirits. It takes up the cosmic and supernatural history of sin in the First Week and now gives it particular focus in the eschatological drama of another kingdom opposed to that of Christ. The kingdom of Satan exercises power through fear, terror, deception and violence (Exx 140). It also has its 'apostles' and servants; it parallels the contemplation of the incarnation, for it too envisages the whole world (Exx 141).

Just as the temptations of Christ are all sociopolitical and religious possibilities within 'this' world, so the Two Standards offers us a hermeneutic for the concrete realities of our own history, circumstances and choices. In whatever guise evil presents itself, there is an active hatred of human freedom which it seeks to destroy with entrapments and seductions: coveting wealth, vain honour, pride (Exx 142). We can see that the effect of these is threefold:

¹⁸ Hugo Rahner, *The Spirituality of St Ignatius of Loyola: An Account of Its Historical Development*, translated by Francis John Smith (Chicago: Loyola, 1953), 95.

1. To destroy human freedom by false knowledge and illusion, especially the illusion.
2. To draw people into the world, which is itself transitory and cannot ultimately fulfil them. This becomes a distortion of the Principle and Foundation because we cease to use created things well. Not only do we destroy our own freedom, but we have a purely instrumental approach which destroys the very good that we seek.
3. To try to destroy the *imago Dei* in each of us through pride, especially as God has chosen us as the object of the Divine Love. Pride is ultimately the illusion of our own power and self-sufficiency. It not only rejects God but, because it sees God as a rival, seeks to destroy God and faith in Christ, who is God's salvific and liberating love. Pride must always exercise its power as violence in one form or another. This is precisely what we see enacted in the figure of Lucifer.

Although the dynamics of evil are presented in personal terms, we come to recognise that it is always an active and immanent power present throughout all our social and cultural systems. Whatever form it takes, especially when concealed under 'the good', it creates a toxic universe which is hostile not only to human flourishing but to the life of all that God has created and blessed as good. The Two Standards operates as a process of unmasking of the personal and systemic deceptions of evil.

In the presentation of Christ, the true leader, we have the exact counter-values and God's *modus operandi*: humility. Here, we gain critical knowledge of how God works: we are not coerced or terrified into subjection. Grace never usurps our freedom but creates new possibilities for it to be realised in service of God's good purposes. There are no limits to the Kingdom that Christ envisages. His power is demonstrated not through violence, but through sacrificial loving service: in poverty (spiritual and actual), suffering humiliation and contempt, and, finally, in humility. This is the way of the cross but, in accepting it, the Christian servant of Christ the King and His mission must also become the servant of His way of realising it.

We can now recognise that discernment not only takes place within the horizon of the eschatological drama of the Kingdom, but is also verified in the way of the cross. It is a profoundly theological act: an act of faith and surrender to the incomprehensible wisdom of a crucified

and risen Christ.¹⁹ As such, it also has its own eschatological character, for choosing to be ‘thought worthless and a fool for Christ’—*de ser estimado por vano y loco por Cristo* (Exx 167)—is a realisation of the Kingdom.

In this way, all acts of discernment must always be measured in terms of how far they advance the Kingdom through the means that Christ establishes: obedience and the cross, the total and uncompromising dependence upon the Father. In some way and at some level, they will be counter-intuitive to the values and wisdom of the world. It will not be sufficient to ensure that any decision or course of action simply resists the traps of the enemy; it will have positively to express the values and means that God’s salvific wisdom disclosed in Christ.

We can now appreciate how discernment is grounded in cruciform knowledge and presupposes it. The ‘rightness’ of discerned decisions cannot be measured by the normal criteria of success but, rather, in the way we are open to the sovereignty of Christ in our lives and in our works. Only this will truly serve the Kingdom. In this way, discernment is not just an instrument, but a test of our desires and our values; it draws us into the mystery of the divine economy. Augustine captures this when, in his discussion of the cross, he argues that God works not by ‘power’ but by righteousness. In so doing, God refuses to be trapped in a worldly logic and remains true to God’s self, paradoxically demonstrating the absolute nature of God’s power as Divine freedom. Against evil God simply asserts God’s self and discloses the infinite abyss of Love where evil cannot penetrate.²⁰

A Messianic Vocation

Even in the light of these initial remarks on some principal elements of the Exercises, we can begin to sense the extent of their implications in the sociopolitical field. I shall make three final observations.

Epistemology of the Two Standards

As we have seen, neither the Two Standards nor the Three Modes of Humility can be thought of as operating purely within a privatised interior

¹⁹ See 1 Corinthians 1:18 following. For an excellent treatment of this theme, see Michael J. Gorman, *Inhabiting the Cruciform God: Kenosis, Justification, and Theosis in Paul's Narrative Soteriology* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2009).

²⁰ Augustine, *De Trinitate*, 13.13 following. See also 4.12–13: here, reflecting on the Magi, Augustine ‘anticipates’ the Two Standards. He argues that we should seek to return to our homeland (heaven) by another way, ‘which the humble king has taught and which the proud king, the adversary of that humble king, cannot block’. Augustine also traces the strategies of deceit which characterize the devil.

spirituality. They are set within the struggle for the Kingdom, and it is within the realm of our existence and history that they are lived out. This is a real participation in the immanent work of Christ 'labouring and working' in the reality of each circumstance or moment. Both meditations necessarily contain an epistemology. The full importance of those verbs, *conocer* and *imitar*, is realised: we have entered into 'the mind of Christ' (1 Corinthians 2:16). This is a continuation and deepening of our conversion. At its core is the freedom to enter into an ever deeper self-offering of the *Suscipe* (Exx 234). This self-offering is central to Ignatius' 'apostolic mysticism' and the touchstone of mission.²¹

Discernment as Transvaluation

In this context, we can see that discernment is more than a tool. It is itself an apostolic moment. We cannot ignore the exigencies of our situation or the pressing realities of human finitude. On the contrary, these are precisely the realities whose limitations the incarnation requires us to acknowledge and handle. Yet, as the Principle and Foundation has taught us, by grasping the way in which finitude discloses transcendence, when placed within the horizon of the Fourth Week, these very limitations can become the contingent opportunities to realise the Kingdom. Even so, given our weaknesses and the unfinished business of history, we cannot seek to meet our need for security in the systems and institutions of the world. If they are well established and ordered, they will surely be tokens of the Kingdom, but they can be no more than this. Discernment is always an act of surrender to God in faith.

***Discernment is
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At another level, when the values of the Standard of Christ are the operative ones in discernment, there is a transvaluation of the counter-values of the world. There is a redemptive power in this. Discernment is a radical practice when we allow ourselves to be poor, despised and humble with Christ. When these become the active values realised in our decisions, especially those about apostolic works and institutions, the Kingdom comes into view. This will always present a threat to the established order and to our own securities. What then would it mean if we could develop our social, economic and educational

²¹ The phrase 'apostolic mysticism' is an insight of Hugo Rahner, *The Spirituality of Ignatius of Loyola*, translated by Francis John Smith (Westminster, Md: Newman, 1953); see also Joseph de Guibert, *The Jesuits: Their Spiritual Doctrine and Practice*, translated by William J. Young (Chicago: Institute of Jesuit Sources, 1964), 178 following.

policies guided by these values: values that would prioritise the needs (spiritual, social and material) of the contemporary *anawim*, the powerless and marginalised, the economically and culturally deprived?

The Two Standards and End of Violence

Finally, it could be argued that the greatest transvaluation would be the ending of the cycle of violence in all its forms. René Girard's theory of mimetic violence can serve to underline the relevance of the Two Standards in this regard, not only on the spiritual-theological plane but also in the field of politics. For Girard, societies are founded on primal acts of sacrificial violence (the scapegoat). This violence is rooted in the power of *mimetic desire*, which inscribes it into social structures: 'The principal source of violence between human beings is mimetic rivalry, the rivalry resulting from imitation of a model who becomes a rival or of a rival who becomes a model'.²²

The mimetic cycle is broken by the cross, which refuses to enter into it. What Christianity is able to do through its own counter-mimetic mechanism (*imitar*) is to heal the violence. It can restore peace by absorbing violence and performing those reconciliations that are deliberate counter-strategies to it. The Two Standards provides us with a *praxis of reconciliation*, which refuses violence and the sacrifice of victims. In this sense, we are drawn into the redemptive work of the cross as a political and social reality.

This gives us a way of understanding the Church's mission in the world. It is a mission which belongs to every Christian life. The mark of its liberating power is the act of martyrdom. The prayer to imitate Christ in poverty, in humility and in being despised bears the marks of martyrdom, both in the sense of 'witness' and also in suffering social, political, economic and spiritual violence, if not actual physical violence, while also refusing to return it. As a praxis, this provides an exodus from the mimetic structures of death. The violence of the enemy and the anti-kingdom will always be directed against it. This, too, is an eschatological reality.

The crucified is always the Risen Christ. If this were not the case, the cycle would remain a tragic one; catharsis is not redemption. The power that triumphs over mimetic violence lies in the resurrection, which

²² René Girard, *I See Satan Fall like Lightning*, translated by James G. Williams (Maryknoll: Orbis, 2001), 11. For a probing analysis and exposition of Girard's mimetic theory, see James Allison, *The Joy of Being Wrong: Original Sin through Easter Eyes* (New York: Crossroads, 1998).

comes through the action and gift of the Holy Spirit: 'The Resurrection is not only a miracle, a prodigious transgression of natural laws. It is the spectacular sign of the entrance into the world of a power superior to violent contagion.'²³ Although Girard is primarily concerned to develop an anthropology, this conclusion provides an important direction for understanding the Exercises. He can help us appreciate that the Fourth Week is not only part of a narrative but is actually the necessary and indispensable source from which the salvific power of Christianity is derived.

First, the resurrection ensures that the way of the crucified Christ as redemptive rather than tragic is always a grace. It is a gift that we must seek and it does not lie in our power: 'if your most holy majesty wishes to choose and receive me into this life and state' (Exx 98). As such, it cannot be achieved through practices in which we only imitate, in the sense of playing a part. The same is true for the gift of discernment. It cannot be effective if it is converted into a formulaic practice. It can only be sought as a grace which first requires an interior surrender to let Christ indwell. This, as I have argued, needs our willingness to be relocated in the eschatological drama of the Kingdom as a quotidian reality.

Secondly, the importance and indispensable requirement of the Fourth Week are too often treated in a perfunctory way and rarely discussed in the context of discernment. Notwithstanding all our good intentions and noble desires, if the reality of the Risen Lord and the abiding gift of the Holy Spirit are not our habitual dwelling and the effective horizon of our understanding, then we will remain always prone, in George Herbert's words, to 'feel His death but not His victorie'.²⁴ Without the Fourth Week, we cannot fully understand the reality of the Kingdom and the true purpose of Christian mission; we cannot be Christ's apostles.

To know and imitate Christ, to have deep interior knowledge of Him, is not an exercise in remembrance or imaginative reconstruction of a first-century Palestinian Jewish Messiah. It is precisely to know and imitate the risen Christ, who is immanent and active in our lives and in our histories. This Christ cannot be made the subject of any state or political party. He is the Christ to whom all nations, parties and movements must ultimately come and under whose cross they will be judged.

²³ Girard, *I See Satan Fall like Lightning*, 189.

²⁴ George Herbert, 'The Dawning', in *The Poems of George Herbert* (Oxford: Oxford U, 1913), 113.

In a reflection given in Notre Dame Cathedral in Paris, the Italian philosopher Giorgio Agamben challenged the Church to recover its messianic vocation. Failure to do so, according to Agamben, risks it being swept away like every other government and worldly institution.²⁵ Even from this selective exploration of the Spiritual Exercises, we can see that the Church is not without resources to propose Christ and the Kingdom to humanity. Although its mission must always be renewed, the indwelling life of the Holy Spirit in the lives of men and women is the guarantee that its mission can never be lost or absorbed, either by coercion or by seduction, into the projects of worldly powers.

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²⁵ Giorgio Agamben, *The Church and the Kingdom*, translated by Giorgio Agamben and Leland de la Durantaye (London: Seagull, 2012), 41.