

# PSYCHODRAMA AND THE SPIRITUAL EXERCISES

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PSYCHODRAMA WAS DEVELOPED by the Jewish doctor Jacob Levy Moreno (1884-1974), who was born in Romania and eventually settled in the USA. In the various forms of bibliodrama—a term used to denote psychodrama involving some reference to the Bible—those participating improvise sketches on biblical themes. They are seeking new religious insight by identifying themselves with biblical figures and situations. Bibliodrama may be understood as an open-ended process of interaction between a group and a biblical text.<sup>1</sup> At least for the moment, it seems to be meeting a need. It complements historical and critical approaches to the Bible with something more existential and something involving the body. Its approach to the biblical text may seem pre-modern, but it answers concerns that are post-modern, or even anti-modern.

What happens when an Ignatian retreat includes psychodrama sessions? We once began a psychodrama session during the Exercises, by inviting the group to take up attitudes and gestures. Then we asked them to freeze, to become like statues, and to see what was emerging from the whole group. The group eventually decided to form something like Rodin's sculpture, 'The Burghers of Calais'—six men offering themselves as hostages during the Hundred Years War in return for the siege of Calais being lifted. The central point was the gestures of giving up, the sense of resignation as the keys were to be handed over to the enemy.

All the participants took up the opportunity to adopt various roles within the sculpture, and also to look at the whole from outside. Following this phase of creative statue work, we asked the group what biblical story came into their minds as they were doing the exercise and

<sup>1</sup> The phrase is Karl Frielingsdorf's: 'Bibliodrama' (1994), in *Lexikon für Theologie und Kirche*, third edition, vol. 2, p. 415.



Neil Prensall SJ

physically acting out the roles. The group chose the story of Abraham setting out to sacrifice Isaac. Several variations on the biblical story were then played out, in sketches following one after the other. Quite striking differences became apparent in people's images of God, in their understandings of the father-son relationship, and also between how men and women typically interpreted the story.

There are various kinds of psychodrama and bibliodrama. For the sake of clarity, I shall confine myself to the approach developed by Moreno himself. This form of psychodrama, even when undertaken during an Ignatian retreat, does not necessarily start from a biblical text; it can also begin from what emerges during the group session, or from some personal biographical material presented by one of the participants, such as a dream.<sup>2</sup>

<sup>2</sup> See Wilma Scategni, *Psychodrama, Group Processes and Dreams: Archetypal Images of Individuation*, translated by Vincent Marsicano (Hove: Brunner-Routledge, 2002 [1996]). For general information in English, see the website [www.dryw.freereserve.co.uk/mainindex.html](http://www.dryw.freereserve.co.uk/mainindex.html), notably the glossary of terms.

### ***Psychodrama and Moreno***

For Moreno, humanity is primordially relational, interactive: ‘Role playing is prior to the emergence of the self. Roles do not emerge from the self, but the self may emerge from roles.’<sup>3</sup> Here ‘role’ denotes all the different structured ways in which we can have experiences or relate to people—not just those which we adopt consciously, but also ‘psychosomatic’ roles, roles which are not so much chosen as inflicted on us by sickness or disability. The different techniques of psychodrama help us to understand the roles we adopt, to work through them, and if need be to grow beyond them. As we become in a new way aware of an all too familiar role we have been playing, we can experiment with abandoning or replacing it—either from our range of other roles or with something quite new.

Psychodrama aims to deepen our relationships. Its approach centres not on the diagnosis of pathologies, but rather on how the stimulus of interpersonal communication can bring to light the healthy parts of the personality. It uses the imagination to let inner images surface. Through the use of such exercises as that of the empty chair—on which the person making the exercise imagines another person sitting—these inner images can then be externalised in the psychodrama.

### ***Psychodrama during Retreats***

When the Ignatian Exercises are enriched with bibliodrama or psychodrama, the inner images which arise during the prayer exercises are taken up and, with the group’s help, expressed externally. The levels of vividness may vary from simple gestures or poses to elaborately worked out sketches. From time to time, it might be helpful if the leader gives some content—perhaps, for example, a gospel passage that seems to fit with where most of the exercitants are. But in general, both Ignatian and psychodramatic considerations suggest it is better to let the group make its own choice. Leaders have no special knowledge as to what is appropriate, and it is not their role to pass on some wisdom already processed elsewhere. It is much more the case that they are part of the very process: they take their lead from the

<sup>3</sup>J. L. Moreno, *Psychodrama* (Beacon, NY: Beacon House, 1977 [1946]), vol, 1, p. 177.

network of relationships and spiritual movements, with Moreno's ideas as a useful resource. What the group actually needs to talk about may be very different from the official, conventional theme, and the discovery of this may well be the result of a genuine discernment in common.

Anything in life can be incorporated into the drama. From the Bible, it is mostly narrative passages that are chosen, because they lead easily to an exploration of how people behave. Similarly, key ideas in the Ignatian Exercises (the Call of the King, Hell, the Incarnation, the Two Standards, and so on) are often re-expressed narratively. Moreover, psychodramatic sessions during retreats need not always use explicitly spiritual material. It can often be the most immediate—and therefore, in the end, the most spiritual—option to dramatize the everyday reality through which the members of the group are currently living. After all, Ignatius wants them to be 'finding God in all things'.

### ***The Magic Shop***

It is the fourth day of a ten-day directed retreat. The group has come together for its regular two-hour afternoon session of bibliodrama. Today the leaders are standing behind the counter of an imaginary shop, in which everyone's deepest wishes can be fulfilled. The payment is made not with pounds, dollars or euros, but with Something Important (or also Superfluous, something that I have long wanted to get rid of). One of the participants begins. She wants to get rid of her fear of large groups, and instead begin to enjoy sharing herself with others. Another person wants to come to terms with the conflicts at his work-place, and is prepared in exchange to give up some of his pet ideas. A third person is seeking the courage to carry through her plans—she pays by singing a song, with everyone joining in.

Gradually the whole group, which is observing the interactions, warms to the action. The wishes become more personal and intimate. Above all, those who play the role of customers come to see that they only really gain when they commit something important—a maxim that applies both in the Exercises and in psychodrama. The ultimate 'currency' in this shop consists of human desires: the desire for a full life, expressed through the wishes in the role-play, and emerging gradually in the process of the Exercises through the patient discrimination of spirits.

### ***Jonah in the Belly of the Whale***

Before this session, the group had already warmed up with some movement exercises. It became clear that there were two people wanting to act out a drama, in both cases drawing on biblical materials. Karen wanted 'to spend five minutes being Peter so as to ask Jesus something'. Irene wanted to be Jonah thrown into the sea.

The group decided that Karen's wish would not take long, and hence to take up both wishes. Karen asked Tony to take on the role of Jesus, and indicated that he should be distant, with little eye contact. Then she complained to Jesus about his caring for people like the woman who was a sinner, while almost ignoring his disciples. Then she and Tony exchanged roles: now Karen took on the role of Jesus. 'That's true', she found herself saying, 'but I've still got big plans for you lot'. Tony then gave his feedback about how he had experienced the two roles, and the group proceeded to reflect together on the theme of rivalry among the disciples. It became clear that the role was tapping in to something left over from the previous day for Karen. She expressed this, and briefly acted it out, before the group turned to Irene's wish to enact the Jonah story.

Using some furniture, one of the men in the group represents the ship: other participants chosen by Irene are sailors, waving brightly coloured cloths as sails. Edward is the steersman and Paul the captain. Irene tells them both how she understands their role.

Inanimate objects too can be represented by people. Irene chooses Karen to be a bottle of red wine. Her idea is that this should be drunk during the drawing of lots to discover the guilty person—but during the role-play this gets forgotten. Two of the women represent the rising storm.

The final scene-setting and the beginning of the play itself are high-spirited, reminiscent of a farce: the captain leads Jonah to the cabin where he is to sleep. When the storm comes, one of the sailors becomes sick. Water is pumped out, and the captain shouts orders all over the place. Tony takes on the role of the one who says, 'it's the foreigner's fault', and later, 'we need to throw the foreigner overboard'. The captain fetches Jonah, and there then develops a long dialogue, with Irene and Paul exchanging roles several times.

'I don't want to jump in myself; I want to be thrown', says Irene, playing nervously with a piece of thread in a way that expresses not

only fear and despair, but also a hope for survival. It is when Paul is Jonah that the actual throwing overboard first takes place. Irene (as the Captain) blindfolds him, drags him to the railing with two of the sailors, and throw him gently into the sea. All cry out: 'we've got rid of *him*, but the ship is still in danger'. But then the storm calms down (in truth it had not been very active for some minutes), and the whole assembly cries: 'what a great God is the God of Jonah!'

Then this part of the story is played out again, with the roles reversed. When Irene falls into the sea, her face expresses relief. She remains there, crouched down, playing with the thread that represents her whole life. 'I'm going to fall into a deep sleep, perhaps into a coma. I know the whale is coming. But somehow it will all carry on . . .'

The group discussion is marked by rich sharing: many of the participants talk about their own experiences of fear and anxiety. Irene herself begins to come to terms with her own childhood, that had been marked by serious sickness and the threat of death, and also with how the fear she had suffered, and her long hospitalisation, had affected her whole life.

### ***Helpfulness and Unhelpfulness***

A group who made this sort of retreat were asked for their reactions. Some found the novelty disturbing; others found it both stimulating and challenging. People regularly criticized the failure to make a sufficiently clear distinction between drama based on the Bible and psychodrama in general—the input that had been given had clearly not met the concern. These people were looking for straight biblical material without reference to personal biographies; they found the role-plays irritating (though what they wrote made it clear that this was not always the case). Some found that the Exercises and the psychodrama did not fit together, and to some extent got in each other's way—though others found the relationship more integrated. It is clear that any retreat of this kind needs to be very clearly explained beforehand. On this occasion, much had been said on the subject during the conversations with prospective participants, but it had not been fully heard by many of them. Nevertheless, despite the reservations, all took part fully. Both in individual sessions and in group discussions, the similarities and differences between the Exercises and psychodrama were thoroughly explored.

### **Moreno and Ignatius**

Heike Radeck, a Protestant theologian, has studied the theme of psychodrama and the Exercises very thoroughly, both theoretically and practically.<sup>4</sup> She draws on the literary theory of Wolfgang Iser (reader-response theory) and on the work of Gerhard Martin, the leading authority on bibliodrama in the German Protestant churches.

According to Iser, fictive texts do not depict reality directly. The text is a collection of empty spaces that only become complete when a person reads it, and lets their inner imaginary world be stimulated by what they read. The written text provides a perspective and a stimulus, but the whole reality that is meaning occurs only when the reader enters into relationship with the text. Signs may refer to something beyond themselves, but this principle must not be understood simply in terms of denotation. In fictive texts, the sign serves not to describe or depict, but rather to begin a process of opening us to something new.

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Radeck understands both bibliodrama and the Exercises in these terms, as ways in which people appropriate what are fictive—as opposed to doctrinal or factual—texts:

Against this background, what we are encouraged to receive by bibliodrama and by the Exercises can be understood as the presentation of ‘empty spaces’. The Ignatian *contemplaciones* encourage a carrying over of the biblical scenes into the symbolic world of each person, which will always be different and personal. They pass on what the biblical figures intend to do . . . as an ‘empty space’ of the text, which the exercitant can then play out on their own inner stage. Perhaps, too, the other imaginative procedures are to be understood not so much in terms of filling out the scenic details that are not there in the text, but rather as a stimulus towards the construction of meaning.<sup>5</sup>

<sup>4</sup> Heike Radeck, *Ignatianische Exerzitien und Bibliodrama: Ein hermeneutischer Strukturvergleich* (Stuttgart: Kohlhammer, 1998). See Wolfgang Iser, *The Act of Reading* (London: Routledge, 1978 [1976]); Gerhard L. Martin, *Sachbuch Bibliodrama: Praxis und Theorie* (Stuttgart: Kohlhammer, 2001 [1995]).

<sup>5</sup> Radeck, *Ignatianische Exerzitien und Bibliodrama*, p. 139.

Radeck's understanding of the Protestant *sola scriptura* principle leads her to distinguish the style of bibliodrama developed by Martin that she favours both from Moreno's psychodrama and from the Ignatian Exercises. For Radeck, Moreno's psychodrama is fundamentally determined by biography, even if its content contains biblical elements. It is simply a 'springboard into biography'. By contrast, bibliodrama involves an 'interactive play between the text and the subjective experience of the participants'. She sees Martin's stress on the text itself as marking a fundamental difference between bibliodrama and psychodrama.

This Protestant preoccupation with the biblical text also conditions Radeck's understanding of the Ignatian Exercises. She can fall into the clichés of cheap controversy, although her writing is in general hermeneutically sophisticated and ecumenical in spirit. Radeck is worried that this approach leads to arbitrary and individualistic interpretations, to readings arising simply from people's whims and subjectivity. For Radeck:

In true bibliodrama, the text is not 'exploited' in this kind of way or—to put the matter differently—reduced to the scope of individual life-projects. Gerhard Marcel Martin puts forward a style of 'dramatization' which is not pursuing any agenda of this kind, any interest which somehow governs the interaction between the biblical text and the participants.

Radeck's criticisms, however, need qualifying. Neither in classical psychodrama nor in the Exercises is the biblical text 'exploited'. Nor does the kind of personal meaning sought emerge from the use of only some methods and the avoidance of others. Practitioners both of classical psychodrama and of the Exercises can agree with how Radeck, following Martin who supervised her doctorate, names as the goal 'the interaction between the biblical text and the participants'. When, however, she elaborates the point about the avoidance of a particular agenda, it is clear that Radeck's commitments to Reformed Christianity have run away with her:

There are at least two aspects of the Exercises which seem problematic for modern Protestants. Firstly, the fact that Ignatius has quite openly made piety a set of techniques, something you can learn and teach, something divided up into steps and encompassed

in methods. Secondly, the way in which the Catholic magisterium strictly regulates existential decision-making.<sup>6</sup>

The author, for all her care and courtesy, is being influenced here by the image of the Exercises as an instrument of power and indoctrination. Perhaps some Jesuits have used the Exercises in that way in the past, but this kind of polemic is impeding serious discussion of the issues. It clearly is the case that any sort of bibliodramatic work, of whatever psychological school or confessional origin, is in danger of becoming ideological. The best ways of countering this danger are a clear awareness of one's methods and their limits, and a careful process of reflection.

There are, as we have noted, questions about the congruence between psychodramatic activity and the silence, the contemplative process, of the Exercises. Radeck has some useful points to make here. She lists various elements that she takes from the Exercises tradition, and suggests that they could indeed enrich her version of bibliodrama. The change in focus that comes with First Week conversion might deepen the way in which bibliodrama works with the body, 'providing an access to the fundamental dynamic for each person through their spontaneous bodily reactions'.<sup>7</sup> The Ignatian prayer of desire can enhance the vitality of those taking part in bibliodramatic exercises. The conversation with a director helps foster the process of discernment.

### ***Role-Play and Role-Reversal***

We can end by highlighting two points that are central not only to Moreno's method but also to his understanding of the human person as both creative and spiritual. When *role-play* is used during the retreat, exercitants get in touch with resources from their unconscious. These resources deepen people's reading of the text in a way that is then brought into the group. It is their inner world of images that comes into contact with the text's 'empty spaces', filling the text out in the way appropriate to the moment, presenting the result for objective checking by the group, and finally—as Martin would have it—

<sup>6</sup> Radeck, *Ignatianische Exerzitien und Bibliodrama*, p. 154.

<sup>7</sup> Radeck, *Ignatianische Exerzitien und Bibliodrama*, p. 160.

returning to the text. It is the person's own creativity and spontaneity, open as it is to transcendence, that leads them forward, not the leaders' pedagogical purpose or their sober reflective theology.

For its part, Moreno's *role-reversal* is not just a technique, but rather a form of expression utterly basic to Christianity. In our very flesh, the mystery of an incarnate God is being expressed—a God who, in a 'wonderful exchange' became, as the Philippians hymn has it, like a slave. The exchange of roles in bibliodrama is a way of putting oneself in the very place of the other, and as such is a profoundly Christian exercise. Not everyone who gives Ignatian Exercises needs to offer psychodrama sessions. But Moreno's version of bibliodrama is certainly a form of mystagogy. Like the Ignatian Exercises, it leads people into the mystery of God.

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