

THE IGNATIAN PARADOX

W. W. Meissner

MOST JESUITS AND MANY OTHERS who have experienced the Spiritual Exercises, whether as retreatants or as retreat-givers, have encountered the Ignatian paradox: the effectiveness of the Exercises depends both entirely on one's personal effort and at the same time entirely on divine grace. The familiar Ignatian formula says 'Pray as though everything depended on God, and work as though everything depended on you'. More recently, it has been claimed that the authentic version of the saying is yet more provocative: 'So trust God as if the success of things depended only on you, not at all on God. Yet so bend every effort as if you are about to do nothing, but God alone everything'.¹ However, even the more familiar version raises issues of interest to any student of Ignatian spirituality, and it is these that I shall explore here.

The interplay of divine and human action was for Ignatius no impersonal abstraction, but rather an effective guiding principle in his own spiritual and mystical life. As he was discussing pastoral training in the *Constitutions*, Ignatius commented:

Although all this can be taught only by the unction of the Holy Spirit and by the prudence which God our Lord communicates to those who trust in His Divine Majesty, nevertheless the way can at least be opened by some suggestions which aid and dispose one for the effect which must be produced by divine grace.²

In his biography of Ignatius, Ribadeneira wrote: 'When he undertook something, most frequently he seemed not to count on any human

¹ For a convenient and illuminating discussion of the historical issue, summarizing and developing insights of Gaston Fessard and Hugo Rahner, see J. P. M. Walsh 'Work as if Everything Depends On—Who?' *The Way Supplement*, 70 (Spring 1991), pp. 125-136.

² *Constitutions* IV.8.8 [414].

means, but to rely only on divine providence; but in carrying it out and bringing it to completion, he tried all means to achieve success'.³ I would conclude not only that Ignatius' personal psychology is of critical significance for understanding the basic psychology of the Exercises,⁴ but that a deeper understanding of the paradox provides a kind of opening wedge into the complexities of the psychology of grace. In this light, the paradox is a reflection of the deeper paradox of human freedom—that human beings become more free to the extent that they submit to the grace and freedom of God.⁵

Before taking a step further, it may be well to dispense with an old and discredited canard, namely that psychic determinism and human freedom are antithetical. The Freudian insistence on determinism as the guarantee of scientific rationality does not eliminate or stand in opposition to the notion of human freedom. The case for freedom in human action and as a necessary element in psychoanalytic theory and therapy has been amply and effectively argued elsewhere.⁶ Psychoanalysis and the psychology of the Exercises in fact share a common goal—the enhancement of freedom and of the capacity for free choice.

Desolation

There are any number of contexts in which the paradox finds application in Ignatius' spiritual teaching. His advice in dealing with desolation in the Rules for Discernment for the First Week serves as a good example. He suggests three steps for dealing with desolation: (1)

³ MHSJ FN 4, p. 882, cited in Gilles Cusson, *Biblical Theology and the Spiritual Exercises* (St. Louis: The Institute of Jesuit Sources, 1988) p. 71, n. 75. See also FN 3, p. 631; 4, p. 846; *Constitutions* X.2-3 [813-814].

⁴ See W. W. Meissner, *To the Greater Glory: A Psychological Study of Ignatian Spirituality* (Milwaukee: Marquette University Press, 1999).

⁵ See Karl Rahner, 'Grace and Freedom' in *Sacramentum Mundi*, edited by Karl Rahner et al., vol. 2 (New York: Herder and Herder, 1968), pp. 424-427.

⁶ See, for example: Robert R. Holt, 'Ego Autonomy Re-evaluated', *International Journal of Psychoanalysis*, 46 (1965), pp. 151-167; Edwin R. Wallace, *Historiography and Causation in Psychoanalysis* (Hillsdale, NJ: Analytic Press, 1985); Ernest Wallwork, *Psychoanalysis and Ethics* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1992); and the following publications of my own: 'Freedom of Conscience from a Psychiatric Viewpoint', in *Conscience: Its Freedom and Limitations*, edited by William C. Bier (New York: Fordham University Press, 1971), pp. 125-142; *Psychoanalysis and Religious Experience* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1984); *The Ethical Dimensions of Psychoanalysis* (Albany: SUNY Press, 2003).

recognise it for what it is; (2) resist any impulse to change prior decisions leading to spiritual growth; and (3) do what seems advisable to deal with the desolation and its causes.⁷ These points resemble what therapists and analysts say about treating depression.⁸ The patient must first recognise their condition as a depression, but even more importantly they must accept and bear the pain and anguish connected with it. Then they should take hold of themselves, and not allow their tormenting feelings and the discouragement and hopelessness of their condition to lead to significant changes in their life or to any other important decisions. And lastly, they have to find a way to mobilise their resources to deal with the causes of their depression and work themselves out of it.

The process involves, therefore, both passive and active components—passive in bearing the painful feelings, active in doing something about them. Even to recognise and accept a state of depression (the first and second of the steps identified above) involve an active engagement with the situation, a mobilising of one's personal capacities for self-observation, and a certain distancing from the affective affliction of the depression. All these are preparing the way for the person to deal more actively and effectively with the depression later on. Ignatius' advice in the First Week Discernment Rules echoes what I have identified in therapeutic terms as the third step:

Although we ought not to change our former resolutions in time of desolation, it is very profitable to make vigorous changes in ourselves against the desolation, for example, by insisting more on prayer, meditation, earnest self-examination, and some suitable way of doing penance. (Exx 319)

This approach also converges with the *agere contra* (Exx 13, 97, 157), which plays such a dominant role in Ignatian spirituality.⁹ While these points would seem to emphasize human efforts to overcome desolation,

⁷ Exx 322; for this interpretation see Jules J. Toner, *A Commentary on St Ignatius' Rules for the Discernment of Spirits: A Guide to Principles and Practice* (St Louis: Institute of Jesuit Sources, 1982).

⁸ See E. R. Zetzel, 'On the Incapacity to Bear Depression' (1965), in *The Capacity for Emotional Growth* (New York: International Universities Press, 1970), pp. 82-114.

⁹ See also *Constitutions* III.1.13 [265]: 'Temptations ought to be anticipated by their opposites, for example, if someone is observed to be inclined toward pride, by exercising him in lowly matters thought fit to aid toward humbling him; and similarly of other evil inclinations.'

the efforts must be supplemented by a prayerful turning to God for grace. Once again we find a reflection of the Ignatian paradox: trust completely in God, but act as though the result depended on your own effort.

Desolation implies that the effort to establish control and achieve proper organization and integration in the spiritual life has encountered a snag of some sort, some resistance which one is not able to overcome. Ignatius' suggestions were intended to help exercitants to bring their effort to bear on that area of resistance and overcome it. In prayer, for example, we not only beg God's help to overcome desolation, but in the very act of prayer we have begun to mobilise our inherent psychological strengths. Self-analysis can help to discern the source of the resistance and direct our resources to overcoming it. Likewise, the use of penances implies and reinforces the disposition of psychic resources in countering desolation. The reinstitution of inner control and autonomy, and the regaining of a degree of more adaptive self-functioning, are accompanied by the experience of consolation. The role of grace, working in and through created power and effort, may be synonymous with the effort of the subject in willing a change. While some spiritual writers would insist that such effort, unaided by grace, cannot undo spiritual desolation,¹⁰ the question to my mind remains open. Perhaps the issue hinges on the extent to which desolation and depression may be mingled—the one responsive to spiritual means, the other to natural. But, practically speaking, it makes little difference, especially since we cannot know when grace is playing a part. In fact, as I have argued, the self-conscious mobilisation of natural resources may be one expression of a motivation sustained by grace. What counts is the mobilising of resources to counter the desolation—another expression of *agere contra*.

Poverty

Another striking example of the role of the paradox is Ignatius' prolonged, laboured, and doubt-filled preoccupation with the nature of poverty in the Society of Jesus. Granted that the decision regarding the status of poverty in the Society was weighty and fraught with

¹⁰ Toner, *A Commentary*, for example pp. 159-160.

implication, his vacillations, as described in his *Spiritual Diary*,¹¹ reflect a process of severe obsessional doubt and hesitation—reaching the decision, then undoing it, then returning to a sense of confident assurance only to undo it again in a paroxysm of doubt, and repeating the whole cycle seemingly endlessly. But, nonetheless, it is interesting how he resolved the issue, using his own rules for discernment and coming to a decisive resolution through extensive periods of prayer and consultation, seeking to find the path of human wisdom and divine guidance. From a psychoanalytic perspective, none of this sounds unfamiliar. Given the strain of obsessiveness in Ignatius' personality,¹² none of this is surprising. Whatever dynamics of unresolved conflict were at work in him, they did not prevent, but certainly prolonged, his coming to a definitive conclusion.

The ultimate test for Ignatius, the kind of confirmation he valued most, was in the order of mystical illumination, along the lines of the first Ignatian 'time' for making an election (Exx 175). That he was able to bring himself to a meaningful resolution of his ambivalent conflicts on the one hand, and to discern effectively the compromising aspects of his need for divine confirmation on the other, speaks eloquently to his persistent resolution and determination. But such illumination was not often available to him. His efforts are eloquent testimony to the persistent strength of his ego, his sense of self. Here again we find the basic Ignatian paradox—he exerted every effort as though the outcome were dependent on the genuineness and strength of that effort, but prayed, sought the consolation of divine illumination, as though everything depended on God. The criterion he chose was strikingly subjective: a sense of security and a lack of desire to seek any further confirmation. He spoke of 'a certain security or assent that the election was well made' (10 February 1544); of 'great tranquillity and security of soul, like a tired man who takes a complete rest' (11 February); of confirmation by 'tears and a complete sense of security about all I had decided' (12 March). Yet this mystical inclination was combined with a more practical and down-to-earth mind-set that would not rest easily in this

Ignatius had to face and resolve his ambivalent conflicts

¹¹ Available in Saint Ignatius of Loyola, *Personal Writings*, edited by Joseph A. Munitiz and Philip Endean (London: Penguin, 1996), pp. 65-109.

¹² See W. W. Meissner, *Ignatius of Loyola: The Psychology of a Saint* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1992), pp. 373-375.

subjective certitude, but rather sought a broader base of security in data and reasons.

Love in the Spiritual Exercises

The Ignatian paradox also finds expression in Ignatius' views on love. The *Spiritual Exercises* have little to say directly about love, but a good deal more about service. Yet clearly the motivational driving force behind the ethic of service is love, specifically love for God and humanity. At the very end of the Exercises, Ignatius speaks of 'the great service which is given to God because of pure love' (Exx 370) as a goal to be prized above all else. Motifs of love and service are fused into a mutually sustaining theme pervading all of his spirituality. If there is justice in de Guibert's distinction between mysticism of love or union and mysticism of service,¹³ the motif of service dominates the *Spiritual Exercises* and the *Constitutions*, while the motif of love emerges as the dominant theme in his *Spiritual Diary*.

The essence of Ignatius' teaching on love is found in the Contemplation to Attain Love (Exx 230-237), specifically in the two preliminary comments: love is found in deeds rather than words (Exx 230), and love is a matter of mutual exchange between lover and beloved (Exx 231). Ignatius stresses humble service in the kingdom of God as the preferred expression of love for God—the theme that found such dramatic expression in the meditations on the Two Standards and on Christ as King. Secondly he brings out the mutuality in giving and receiving that takes on special relevance in the context of returning love for love in response to the loving initiative coming from God as Creator, Lord and Redeemer. These themes become leitmotifs throughout Ignatius' spiritual teaching and practice.

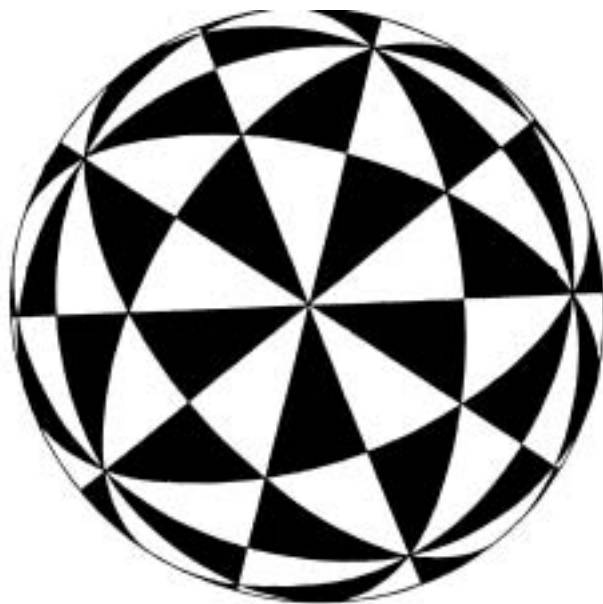
In his discussion of love from a psychoanalytic perspective, Erich Fromm pointed out that love is an activity, not merely a passive emotion.¹⁴ Moreover, it consists in giving rather than receiving. One common misunderstanding is that such giving means giving something up, being deprived, sacrificing. Some would be willing to give, but only

¹³ Joseph de Guibert, *The Jesuits: Their Spiritual Doctrine and Practice* (Chicago: Loyola University Press, 1986 [1942]), pp. 176-181.

¹⁴ Erich Fromm, *The Art of Loving* (New York: Harper and Bros, 1956).

if there is the prospect of receiving something in return. Some make a virtue out of the sense of sacrifice involved in giving up: it is better to give than to receive, meaning that it is better to suffer deprivation than experience satisfaction in giving. But for more mature personalities, giving can be an expression of potency, strength, of the cup overflowing with bounty and joy. Giving is better than receiving because it expresses my vitality and activity.

However, in the *Spiritual Exercises* Ignatius' ideas about the love of God are embedded in certain concise formulae that simply make one



central point but then say little more.¹⁶ It is as though the matter of love was to be left between the exercitant and God—as though a love that could be spiritually transforming and elevating was too personal, too intimate, too much a private matter between God and the soul to permit any further descriptive or prescriptive statements.

Thus the love of God, which was so central to Ignatius' spiritual life, was not—or at least not merely—a matter of human desire or passion. The love that inflamed the soul with spiritual desire and drew

¹⁶ See, for example, Exx 2, 15, 180.

it into closer loving union with God came from God as a gift of divine grace. The theme recurs even more explicitly in his second description of the third 'time' of Election:

That love which moves me and brings me to choose the matter in question should descend from above, from the love of God; in such a way that the person making the election should perceive beforehand that the love, whether greater or less, which he or she has for the matter being chosen is solely for the sake of our Creator and Lord. (Exx 184)

Clearly Ignatius had something more in mind than is implied by the rhetoric of service. For him the love of God reached ecstatic, all-encompassing, all-consuming proportions, and if the unitive themes are not explicitly expressed, they are felt as a powerful presence in the text.¹⁷

Love and charity in Ignatius' spiritual vision were intimately linked to freedom, and to how freedom was contained within the dynamics of grace. Love, along with freedom and grace, was a gift of divine generosity, calling forth a response of loving self-surrender and service. Yet in Ignatius' hands these profound themes have a strikingly human quality—he does not speak of mysteries and transcendence, but of service and mutual exchange. In a unique and powerfully intimate sense, the love of God was for Ignatius a form of object relation between the loving believer and the loving God—for Ignatius, God becomes an object of a personal loving relation. In this sense, Ignatius stands firmly in a Thomistic tradition founded on an idea of a personal relation between God and humanity through grace.¹⁸

At the same time, specifically in terms of such a relation, the human and psychological dimensions have their place. Fromm, for example, connects the need to love with the need to compensate for the anxiety of our human separateness by seeking loving union—at one level in strictly human terms, but also at another level religiously, in terms of union with God. The quality of love of God is a function both of the personal qualities the individual brings to this connection

¹⁷ See Sylvie Robert, 'Union with God and Election', *The Way Supplement* 103 (May 2002), pp. 100-112.

¹⁸ See W. W. Meissner, *Life and Faith: Psychological Perspectives on Religious Experience* (Washington: Georgetown University Press, 1987).

and of the kind of God-image or God-representation in the mind of the believer.¹⁹ In some cultures, the maternal qualities of the godhead predominate; in others, the paternal; in others still, some amalgam thereof. The love of the mother is unconditional, protective, enveloping; it is also a love that cannot be acquired—the mother loves her children because they are hers, not because of what they do or accomplish. Paternal qualities, however, make demands, establish laws and regulations, require obedience. The child is loved best who is most like the father and most obedient to his commands. As Fromm commented:

In the matriarchal aspect of religion, I love God as an all-embracing mother. I have faith in her love, that no matter whether I am poor and powerless, no matter whether I have sinned, she will love me, she will not prefer any other of her children to me; whatever happens to me, she will rescue me, will save me, will forgive me. Needless to say, my love for God and God's love for me cannot be separated. If God is a father, he loves me like a son and I love him like a father. If God is mother, her and my love are determined by this fact.²⁰

Nature and Grace

The Ignatian paradox thus suggests an approach to the psychology of grace. We can see grace as enabling us to become more fully human and to live more ethically, morally, and spiritually in the love and service of God.²¹ The paradox carries us back to the fundamental Thomistic principle: *gratia perficit naturam*. Grace does not replace or override the resources of human nature, but 'perfects' them. It works in and through natural human capacities, strengthening, facilitating, enabling them to do what is ultimately in the self's best interest: to live a good spiritual life and to attain the love of God. Divine loving

¹⁹ See Ana-Maria Rizzuto, *The Birth of the Living God: A Psychoanalytic Study* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1979).

²⁰ Fromm, *The Art of Loving*, p. 67.

²¹ In more traditional terms, such grace would have been categorized as actual and sanctifying grace. For an attempt to explain how Rahner transformed the standard post-Tridentine understandings of grace, see Philip Endean, *Karl Rahner and Ignatian Spirituality*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), pp. 32-67.

intervention through grace, therefore, does no violence to the human subject, but works its effects in and through the inherent powers of the soul.

While Aquinas speaks of grace as perfecting or completing human nature, the underlying assumption concerning the experience of grace is that grace and nature remain separate orders of existence. As Roger Haight, expounding Rahner's theology of grace, explained the matter:

Scholasticism assumed that what human beings experience in the world is simply nature. In the Scholastic view, grace and the operation of grace do not enter into consciousness. 'Nature alone and its acts are the components of the life which we experience as our own.' Grace and all that belongs to the supernatural realm are purely 'ontic' structures, components of being, and do not enter into natural human or psychological experience. The result is that nature and grace (the supernatural) are seen as two layers of reality that scarcely penetrate each other. Grace thus has no part in a person's everyday experience of concrete living.²²

Rahner developed this understanding of grace. He argued for what he called the 'supernatural existential', and for a corresponding obediential potential of human nature as regards grace. In Rahner's view, grace is universally experienced, but not normally *as* grace. It is never to be identified with an object; it is, rather, a horizon of transcendence that is generally 'unthematic' (unadverted to). One consequence is that there is no way of psychologically or experientially distinguishing the effects of grace since they inhere in natural psychic functions. But correspondingly, there is no basis for the suggestion that grace could ever be absent from the human soul. In Ignatius' own life, there is no plausible way of discriminating between how far his spiritual experience was motivated by natural factors and how far it reflected the riches of divine grace. The hagiographic instinct—informed as it is by a less adequate account of grace and nature—would emphasize the latter, but in fact we have no way of knowing. The Ignatian paradox, however, gives us firmer ground for entertaining the possibility that divine grace was profoundly meaningful in shaping Ignatius' psychological and spiritual development.

²² Roger D. Haight, *The Experience and Language of Grace* (New York: Paulist Press, 1979), p. 126.

In fact, such a division or discrimination between the effects of grace and those of nature would seem to be alien to the Ignatian perspective and contraindicated by the Ignatian paradox.

The question for Ignatius is not whether grace *or* nature is effective in the production of spiritual effects, but rather how such effects result from the combination of grace *and* nature. There is no way we can conclude that a specific action or course of action is entirely within human capacity

**Not ‘grace
or nature’
but ‘grace
and nature’**

without the influence of grace; nor, conversely, can we say that such an action is the effect of grace without human activity. What the paradox affirms—the synergism between grace and nature—is balanced by what it denies. And this denial can at times be even more challenging. If it is false and misleading to believe that we can achieve good works and win our way to virtue and salvation without the help of grace, it is equally false and misleading to think that grace and divine intervention will soothe our pains, solve our problems, ease our burdens, answer to our desires, resolve our conflicts and uncertainties, without a commensurate effort of desire, will and action on our part. On these terms, then, God, if you will, helps those who help themselves.

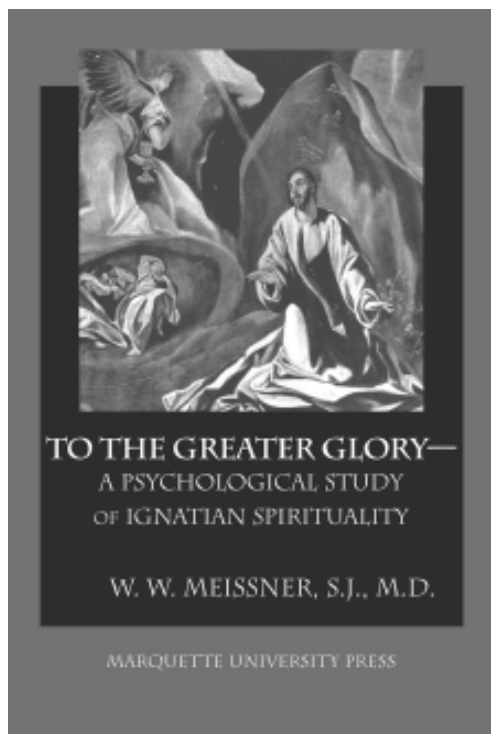
In a 1977 text (though echoing material written many years earlier), Karl Rahner gives some examples from everyday life that he feels reflect the experience of the Spirit in the human soul:

Let us take, for instance, someone who can no longer make their life add up. They cannot fit together the different items in the account: their good will, their mistakes, their guilt, their disasters—even when (what may often seem to them impossible) they try to add contrition to the account. The sum doesn’t work, and they can’t see how God might fit in as an extra item that would make the income and expenditure balance. Then this person gives themselves over—with their life’s irreconcilable balance—to God, or (to put it at once more and less accurately) to the hope of a final reconciliation of their existence, of a kind that cannot be calculated, in which precisely the One whom we call God dwells. In trust and hope they let go of their opaque, unbalanced existence; they do not even know how this miracle occurs that they cannot enjoy and take to themselves as their own self-attained possession. . . . Here is someone who discovers that they can forgive though they receive no reward for it. . . . Here is someone who tries to love God although from God’s silent past-all-graspsness

no answer of love seems to come back. . . . Here is someone who does their duty where they seem only to be able to do it with the burning feeling that they are really denying, exterminating themselves, where they seem only able to do it by doing something terribly stupid that no one will thank anyone for. Here is a person who is really good to someone from whom no echo of understanding and thankfulness is heard in return—then the goodness is not even repaid by the feeling of having been selfless, noble, and so on. Here is someone who is silent although they could defend himself, although they are being unjustly treated. . . . Here someone is obedient, not because they must and if they don't they'll get into trouble, but simply because of that mysterious, silent reality past all grasp we call God and God's will.²³

Without contesting the dynamic subtleties of these examples—whether and in what degree some at least might be questioned in regard to unconscious motivations that would suggest masochistic and narcissistic components—we would have to remark on the sense in which all of these examples would strike the practising psychoanalyst as reflecting familiar themes and falling well within the scope of recognisable human motivations. The analyst would tend to look to unconscious strata of motivation, whereas Rahner is concerned only with conscious and manifest content. The point of emphasis is that these instances of the experience of the Spirit in Rahner's terms are simultaneously reflective of ordinary human capacity. I would add that there is plenty of room for endorsing this principle of integral action of nature and grace as proposed in the Ignatian paradox in the clinical interaction with patients in the analytic setting. Even in that highly secularised and medicalised context, the hand of the Lord may play a role in our best efforts, just as we, in our humble role as healers or

²³ Karl Rahner, 'Experience of the Spirit' (1977), reproduced in *The Practice of Faith: A Handbook of Contemporary Spirituality*, edited by Karl Lehmann and Albert Raffelt (London: SCM Press, 1985 [1982]), pp. 63-70, here pp. 67-68, published translation heavily revised.



An
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and
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by a
leading authority

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A Psychological Study of Ignatian Spirituality
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Pp xiv + 657 \$50.00 US

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counsellors, may play a part in the drama of divine and human interaction.²⁴

However one resonates with these themes, my reading of Ignatius locates him in a transitional phase, as though his thinking was rooted in classical Thomistic doctrine whereas the dynamism of his spirit and inspiration pointed more toward the world of modernity that was only beginning to emerge in his day. The motifs of service and love find a more compatible resonance in the modern context, even given the degree of subjectivisation and humanisation the ideas of God and of his love may have undergone. But Ignatius allowed little room for illusion—his God could not serve as any kind of opiate and basis for illusions of the betterment of the human condition. The vision called for the realisation of Christ's kingdom in this world—and to this extent it carried with it elements of a vision of a more hopeful, even millennialist, future as embodied in the triumph of the kingdom of Christ. But the vehicle lies in the human response to divine initiatives, in devotion to the cause of Christ and self-immolating service—not in any transforming action of God exclusive of human participation and cooperation. The theme echoes the Ignatian paradox—we depend totally on God and his sustaining grace for any effectiveness or achievement, but we act as though the outcome was totally dependent on our own initiative and effort.

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²⁴ See my tentative exploration of these issues in W. W. Meissner, 'So Help Me God! Do I Help God or Does God Help Me?' in *Does God Help? Developmental and Clinical Aspects of Religious Belief*, edited by Salman Akhtar and Henri Parens (Northvale, NJ, and London: Jason Aronson, 2001), pp. 75-126.