

# SEEKING GOD IN ALL THINGS

## Ignatian Spirituality as Action Research

David Coghlan

THE IGNATIAN APPROACH TO SPIRITUALITY VIEWS GOD as active in the world, inviting us to ever closer collaboration. God can be sought and found in our own experience. The Ignatian God is a busy God, and is to be found not—or at least not only—in some static bliss, but rather in acting, in creating.<sup>1</sup> In the Contemplation for Learning to Love Like God, found at the end of the Spiritual Exercises, we pray to find God in the gifts of our world and in how God ‘works and labours’ for me (Exx 236). We seek to love as God loves—and, since love is expressed in action (Exx 230), this means we seek to act as God acts, responding according to the grace we receive. In Ignatian spirituality there is an integral link between prayer and activity. Ignatius offers us a structured set of methods for developing the interaction between the two.

It could be said, therefore, that Ignatian spirituality promotes a form of what is now known as *action research*. This term is used in the world of the social sciences—social work, community development, organization development, nursing, management and so on—to denote an approach to research which integrates the inquiry proper to research with ongoing action. People typically present action and reflection as occurring in a cycle: one moves from planning, to the action itself, to evaluation, and then to planning something new.<sup>2</sup> We learn from our reflection on experience. Knowledge and action are organically connected: knowledge is generated through reflection in and on action.

<sup>1</sup> David L. Fleming, ‘Finding a Busy God’, in *A Spirituality for Contemporary Life* (St Louis: Review for Religious, 1991), 21-30.

<sup>2</sup> David Coghlan and Teresa Brannick, *Doing Action Research in Your Own Organization* (London: Sage, 2001).

In recent years, social science researchers have come to recognise the close connections between knowledge and action. In this context, they have also come to acknowledge the value of spirituality. Recent contributions to the literature have commended a simple awareness of the sacred,<sup>3</sup> transpersonal forms of spirituality,<sup>4</sup> and the Buddhist emphasis on mindful inquiry.<sup>5</sup> But perhaps they have not yet fully recognised the potential of mainstream Christianity.

**There are  
striking overlaps  
between action  
research and  
Ignatian  
spirituality**

In this article, I shall try to redress the balance by pointing to some striking overlaps between motifs of Ignatian spirituality—a spirituality in which ‘action’ is a central motif—and the features of this new pattern of thinking in the social sciences known as action research. Action research is having an increasing influence on the study of spirituality, particularly in its applied forms, and it may be both useful and timely to draw out its similarities to at least one major school of Christian spirituality. Moreover, the technical concepts developed by action research theory might help sharpen the processes of reflection encouraged by Ignatian spirituality. Though the methods of the social sciences are sometimes reductive, either bracketing the religious or else translating it into other—allegedly more accurate—terms, the processes of action research are quite appropriate to the knowledge born of grace and of religious faith.

### **What is Action Research?**

The word ‘research’ is associated in most people’s minds with ideas, with theories. Research is conducted in the world of ideas and their formulation. It was this standard, seemingly common-sense notion of research that shaped the social sciences as they were being first developed. Research, on this model, examines an ‘objective’ truth which exists outside the world of the researcher and which is disconnected from the action of everyday life. Research techniques

<sup>3</sup> Peter Reason, ‘Reflections on Sacred Experience and Sacred Science’, *Journal of Management Inquiry*, 2/3 (1993), 273-283.

<sup>4</sup> John Heron, ‘Transpersonal Cooperative Inquiry’, in *Handbook of Action Research: Participative Inquiry and Practice*, edited by Peter Reason and Hilary Bradbury (London: Sage, 2001), 333-339.

<sup>5</sup> Valerie Malhotra Bentz and Jeremy J. Shapiro, *Mindful Inquiry in Social Research* (Thousand Oaks, Ca: Sage, 1997).

were thus concerned with objective impartiality, with forms of knowledge that were 'valid' and which applied universally.

Social science no longer works with this model alone. When postmodernism began to emerge some thirty years ago, people became more aware of language, and in particular of how our experience is influenced as much by the language we use as by any 'objective' reality. Others have come to regard the purpose of human inquiry not simply as the creation of knowledge for itself, but rather the *enhancement of good practice* in everyday life. The knowledge sought contributes to relationships, to aesthetics, to ecology and to human flourishing.<sup>6</sup> Now, it is argued, is a time for science *in* action rather than science *about* action.

It is in this context that the idea of 'action research' has come to the fore. In the words of two of its leading advocates, action research aims,

... to forge a more direct link between intellectual knowledge and moment to moment personal and social action, so that inquiry contributes directly to the flourishing of human persons, their communities and the ecosystems of which they are part.<sup>7</sup>

Action research has roots in the work of Kurt Lewin, one of the founding fathers of social psychology; in Paolo Freire's work on consciousness-raising; and in various schools of liberation thought, notably Marxist and feminist. We can identify four central characteristics:

- a focus on practical issues, aiming to produce knowledge-in-action
- a participatory mode of doing research *with* people rather than *on* people
- an awareness that truth emerges over time, and that the process may be as important as the outcomes

<sup>6</sup> *Human Inquiry: A Sourcebook of New Paradigm Research*, edited by Peter Reason and John Rowan (Chichester: Wiley, 1981); Reason and Bradbury, *Handbook of Action Research*.

<sup>7</sup> Peter Reason and William R. Torbert, 'The Action Turn: Toward a Transformational Social Science', *Concepts and Transformation*, 6/1 (2001), 1-37, here 6.

- a concern that new knowledge should lead people into a dynamic of emancipation.<sup>8</sup>

### ***Ignatian Sources***

Ignatius, as is well known, spoke of finding God in all things. His close confidant, Jerónimo Nadal, who did much to disseminate Ignatian teaching among the early Jesuits, once described Ignatius as ‘contemplative in action’, and developed a sustained doctrine of the circle of prayer and action. He spoke of the necessity ‘of returning often to prayer and of realising a circular movement passing from prayer to action and from action back to prayer’. In a recent discussion of these ideas, Peter-Hans Kolvenbach, the current Jesuit General, points out that Nadal’s cycle does not imply two different, competing realities, one of which would detract from the other. Rather, people following this path are to be penetrated by ‘the one divine grace’. Kolvenbach then develops the idea:

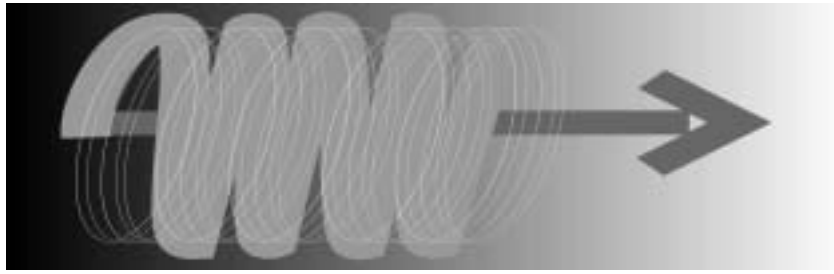
Keeping the image of the cycle, one might say that, in the spiritual progression of the apostolic life, the circle ceaselessly contracts until the two components—prayer and action—mutually penetrate in a harmony by which our human activity becomes the activity of God within us.

The whole reality of human existence becomes the setting where God’s action reveals itself.<sup>9</sup>

In these ideas we find remarkable convergences with action research. Action research does not recognise the distinction between theory and action in the way that traditional social science research does. Rather it reflects Kurt Lewin’s maxim that there should be no theory without action and no action without theory. The central

<sup>8</sup> This classification draws on Reason and Bradbury, *Handbook of Action Research*, 2.

<sup>9</sup> The immediate source for this paragraph is Peter-Hans Kolvenbach, ‘On the Effectiveness of the Spiritual Exercises’, written for the Ignatian centenary in 1991 and reproduced in *The Road from La Storta*, edited by Carl F. Starkloff, (St Louis: Institute of Jesuit Sources, 2000), 189-199, here 196-197. Fuller references and background are to be found in Emerich Coreth, ‘Contemplation in Action’ (1954), in *Contemporary Spirituality*, edited by Robert W. Gleason (New York: Macmillan, 1968), 184-211; Raymond Hostie, ‘The Circle of Prayer and Action’ (1955), in *Finding God in All Things*, translated by William J. Young (Chicago: Regnery, 1958), 153-165; Philip Endean, *Karl Rahner and Ignatian Spirituality* (Oxford: OUP, 2001), 68-93.



dynamic of action research is the enactment of cycles of reflection and action, where the development is from reflection *about* action to critical inquiry *in* action, aiming at 'timely, voluntary, mutual, validity-testing, transformative action at all moments of living'.<sup>10</sup> Clearly there are theological convictions underlying the Ignatian vision which theorists of action research do not express and to which they may well not subscribe. For Christians formed in the Ignatian tradition, the reflection in question here is an inquiry into how God is at work in their lives and in the world, and into how God might shape appropriate responses and reactions for here and now. But both Ignatian spirituality and action research involve a close integration of action and reflection. Just as believers may find that Ignatian spirituality enables a full theological understanding of the processes of action research, so the concepts and ideas developed in action research theory may well enrich and sharpen our understanding of what happens in Ignatian reflection, indeed in an everyday Examen. In the remainder of this article, I propose to introduce various other ideas from action research theory and to show how this enrichment and sharpening might take place.

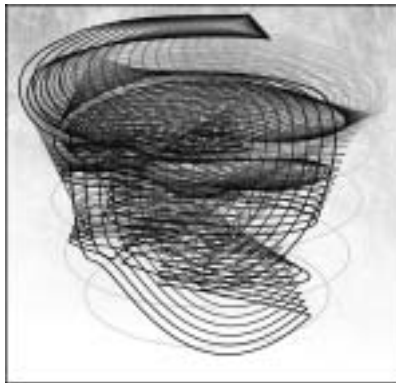
### ***Forms of Knowing***

Action research theory sometimes distinguishes four kinds of knowing, reflecting different ways in which we deal with and act within the world:

<sup>10</sup> Reason and Torbert, 'The Action Turn', 6.

- *Experiential knowing*: the knowledge arising as we encounter the realities around us
- *Presentational knowing*: the knowledge expressed in our giving form to this experiential knowing, through language, images, music, painting and the like
- *Propositional knowing*: the knowledge distilling our experiential and presentational knowing into theories, statements and propositions
- *Practical knowing*: the knowledge that brings the other three forms of knowing to full fruition by *doing* appropriate things, skilfully and competently.<sup>11</sup>

This scheme of four kinds of knowing—experience, expression, understanding, practice—can be applied to our relations with God. What for the Christian is the knowledge born of faith and prayer (*experiential* knowing) is expressed in *presentational* form through our images of God, through the language of our prayers, through religious art and music. That experiential and presentational knowing is articulated in *propositional* form in the statements of our faith, in the Creed, in how our beliefs are formulated and understood through theology. All this is expressed in *practical* knowing as we apply ourselves to trying to live the Christian faith. In terms of the Exercises,



these forms of knowing involve attending to our experience of a personal God, who sent the Son to redeem us and who invites us to love in the way that God loves and to serve God in the world. It means attending to how that love shapes our experience, to how we express and try to understand it and to how it guides our living and acting in the world.<sup>12</sup>

<sup>11</sup> Reason and Torbert, 'The Action Turn', 13.

<sup>12</sup> Tad Dunne, 'Spiritual Integration in Ignatius of Loyola', *Review for Religious*, 45 (1986), 856-869.

### **Phases**

Action research also typically distinguishes between four phases in human projects.

- *Intentions*: purpose, goals, aims and vision
- *Planning*: plans, strategy, tactics, schemes
- *Action*: implementation, performance
- *Outcomes*: results, consequences and effects.<sup>13</sup>

Action research aims to develop our awareness, understanding and skills across all these phases. We try to understand our intentions, to develop appropriate plans and strategies, to be skilled at carrying them out, to reflect on how well we have carried them out, and to evaluate their results. We can also inquire about the connections between these phases. We might, for example, begin with the outcomes, and explore how our actions caused these outcomes. Or we may take the inquiry further, and look at how our intentions and plans shaped our actions.

Ignatian spirituality encourages us to reflect in the same kind of way. The Exercises are concerned above all with ‘what I want and desire’ (Exx 48.1) and with how these desires lead us to act in co-operation with God. The reflection on experience characteristic of Ignatian spirituality typically encourages us to become aware of how our behaviour and its results are rooted in our intentions and desires.

### **Audiences**

Perhaps, however, the most helpful contribution that action research theory can make to Ignatian spirituality comes from the idea that an integrative approach to research incorporates three different *audiences*, which are called ‘first person’, ‘second person’ and ‘third person’.<sup>14</sup> First person inquiry-practice centres on what is happening for the individual researcher. Second person inquiry-practice focuses on the quality of relationships the researcher forms. Third person inquiry-practice disseminates the research to the wider impersonal community.

<sup>13</sup> Reason and Torbert, ‘The Action Turn’, 14.

<sup>14</sup> Reason and Bradbury, *Handbook of Action Research*, 14.

The classical methods of research worked with 'third person' procedures: a researcher did research on third persons and wrote a report for other third persons. Perhaps postmodern theory introduced 'second person' procedures: researchers became aware of their 'positionality', of how their observation itself involved them in the reality being observed. Action research, however, involves all three audiences, all three voices.

*First Person Inquiry-Practice*

First person inquiry-practice is typically characterized as the forms of inquiry-practice that one does on one's own. It fosters the ability of the individual to develop an inquiring approach to their own life, to act in ways that are informed, aware and purposeful. First person inquiry can take us 'upstream', when we inquire into our basic assumptions, desires, intentions and philosophy of life. It can also take us 'downstream', when we inquire into our behaviour, ways of relating, and action in the world. First person inquiry-practice typically finds expression in autobiographical writing: diaries, journals, records of dreams and so on. It also occurs through meditation and prayer.

Ignatius' *Autobiography* well illustrates first person inquiry-practice. Experience was the main catalyst of change in his life.<sup>15</sup> As Ignatius reflected on his experiences he saw the patterns of God's action, and that insight directed him to future action. Throughout his life Ignatius knew how he was subjected to different ways of being stirred to act. He devoted a lot of attention to finding out what moved him in each situation and what kind of action the movement was leading to. He became a master of discernment: he learnt to distinguish and clarify his motivations and the reasons behind his judgements, to probe the causes and implications of what he had experienced, and to weigh and evaluate the likely consequences of the alternatives before him in order to discover what would best lead to the desired goal. For instance, his accounts of the movements of his spirit while on his sickbed in Loyola illustrate both his attention to his moods and his sense of how God was leading him.

**Ignatius as  
master of  
discernment**

<sup>15</sup> David Lonsdale, *Eyes to See, Ears to Hear: An Introduction to Ignatian Spirituality* (London: Darton, Longman and Todd, 2000 [1991]).



Whenever individuals seek to find God in their lives, they are undertaking first person research. This form of inquiry involves seeking God both in times of prayer and in the events of daily life. The *Spiritual Exercises* articulate the process more fully. We discover and acknowledge sin, both our own sin and the world's social sin. We learn that we are nevertheless forgiven, and become desirous to respond to Christ's call, a call to 'love and serve in all things'. Spiritual development occurs in the events of everyday life as the individual attends to experience, makes judgements and assumes responsibility for actions. The whole process occurs within the context of a growing conversion to God's loving action in the world.

A vivid example of first person inquiry is to be found in a reflective essay by Timothy Toohig, a Jesuit physicist who died in 2001.<sup>16</sup> Drawing on Karl Rahner's thought, Toohig views his physics as a deeper penetration into the mystery of creation, and he therefore regards research in physics as praise of God. He uses two words to capture the integration of his physics research and his spirituality: 'honesty' as he confronts the data; and 'authenticity' as he acknowledges the mystery. Honesty and authenticity colour his whole life, not just his physics.

The Ignatian Examen, too, can be seen as a paradigm of first person inquiry. We recall the experiences of the day; we notice our responses and probe what was happening within us, what God might have been telling us in a particular incident; we wonder about what we might do next—whether to repent, to give thanks, or to take some further action.<sup>17</sup> We look not only at the immediate details, but also at their motivational roots. The process moves freely between the two: 'upstream' from action to motivation, and 'downstream' from reflection to thoughts about how I might do something new.

#### *Second Person Inquiry-Practice*

Second person inquiry-practice occurs as we inquire with others into issues of mutual concern, through face-to-face dialogue and conversation.

<sup>16</sup> Timothy E. Toohig, 'Physics Research: A Search for God', *Studies in the Spirituality of Jesuits*, 21/2 (March 1999).

<sup>17</sup> See, for example, Joseph A. Tetlow, 'The Examen of Particulars', *Review for Religious*, 56 (1997), 230-250, here 248-250.

A clear example of second person inquiry-practice in Ignatius' lifetime can be found in the 1539 formal deliberation that occurred when Ignatius and his companions came together to discern what God wanted of them, and in particular whether they should constitute themselves as a permanent group.<sup>18</sup> During the Deliberation, the companions engaged in first person prayer and meditation and then in second person sharing. Over the period of time they lived through questions and uncertainties, exploring the advantages and disadvantages of particular options until they reached unanimity. The outcome was the foundation of the Society of Jesus.

A Christian living in the spirit of Ignatius will be involved in second person inquiry-practice by virtue of their being engaged in a community of faith, whether it be formally in religious life, or in something like a Christian Life Community group, or in an informal network of friends which meets to share faith and support its members. In such contexts individuals share something of their own first person inquiry while the others listen. Then the group attempts to draw together its sense of where God is leading the group. Any form of discernment in common involves second person inquiry-practice.

Second person inquiry-practice also takes place in spiritual direction. The individual and their spiritual director engage in conversation about the individual's life-experience and about how they are seeking to find God in it. Second person inquiry-practice may also find expression in task-oriented teamwork, where the team's purpose, the means of achieving it, the team's procedures, and the development of the individual can all be understood in Ignatian terms.<sup>19</sup>

#### *Third Person Inquiry-Practice*

Third person inquiry-practice also takes place within a community of inquiry. But here the bonds are more impersonal, going beyond the kind of contact fostered by direct mutual collaboration. It involves reporting, publishing, and extrapolating from the concrete to the general.

<sup>18</sup> See Jules J. Toner, 'The Deliberation that Started the Jesuits', *Studies in the Spirituality of Jesuits*, 6/4 (September 1974).

<sup>19</sup> David Coghlan, 'Ignatian Teamwork: An Emergent Framework from the Instructions for the Team at Trent', *Review of Ignatian Spirituality*, no. 98 (2001), 65-74.

Ignatius' *Spiritual Exercises*, his *Constitutions of the Society of Jesus*, and many of his letters illustrate third person inquiry-practice. Now his own experience in personal and interpersonal settings is presented in a form that can be taken up by others whom he has never met. The contact becomes impersonal. In the Christian life more generally, third person inquiry-practice becomes visible in the corporate life of the Church, and in the progress of the planet as a whole. We try to help build up communities of faith; we seek to promote God's action in the world at the institutional and structural levels. Much writing and teaching in Ignatian spirituality centres on theology, on instruction on spirituality, on the promotion of justice, on pedagogy, on organizational processes<sup>20</sup> and the like. This material expresses third person inquiry-practice.



#### *The Three Audiences*

In terms of action research, therefore, we can see Ignatian spirituality as involving all three styles of inquiry-practice, all three audiences. We begin with a first person response to the Call of the King, the Two Standards and the Contemplation for Learning to Love Like God, rooted in the individual's enquiry about how God is found in their experience. We then engage in second person inquiry with others who are living their Christian life in particular circumstances. Finally, this may bear fruit in a wisdom articulated impersonally, in structural and institutional terms—in other words, in third person inquiry-practice. All these processes require us to attend to the different forms and phases of knowing mentioned above, as they are informed by our religious faith, and as our knowledge is discerned and confirmed through action.

<sup>20</sup> David Coghlan, *Good Instruments: Ignatian Spirituality, Organisation Development and the Renewal of Ministries* (Rome: CIS, 1999).

### ***Converging Traditions***

In this article I have attempted to bring two traditions together, Ignatian spirituality and action research. I have explored how the Ignatian cycles of prayer and action find an echo in the cycles of action and reflection articulated in action research theory. Action research works with a richer and more differentiated account of knowledge than those implicit in more classical models of social science, and can therefore accommodate the Ignatian conviction that our prayer and action are grounded in grace, in the reality of being in love with God. The framework of first, second and third person forms of inquiry-practice can yield helpful insight both into Ignatius' own life and into the life of a contemporary Christian.

The worlds of Ignatian spirituality and the world of social research have not often been in close contact. Yet there are many who have been transformed by the Exercises and who live out of a spirituality which can be termed Ignatian—people whose commitment to seeking God in all things leads them to a cycle of action within the world, to reflection, and to prayer. This Ignatian commitment may well be nourished and enhanced by the rigorous methods of action research. For social science itself is now moving towards a concern for action. It is coming to see itself as actively responding to reality, as committed to creating a more meaningful and just world. And thus it has begun to acknowledge and draw on the spirituality of individuals and groups who engage in such action. If the two traditions can converse and cross-fertilise, the fruit may well be both abundant and rich.

**David Coghlan SJ** is an Irish Jesuit who is a faculty member of the School of Business Studies, Trinity College, Dublin, where he teaches organization change and action research. He has an MSc in management science from Manchester University, an SM in management from the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, and a PhD from the National University of Ireland. He has published widely in the areas of organization development and action research. Two of his most recent books are (with Teresa Brannick) *Doing Action Research in Your Own Organization* (London: Sage, 2001); and (with Eilish Mc Auliffe) *Changing Healthcare Organisations* (Dublin: Blackhall, 2003).