

# IGNATIAN DISCERNMENT AND THE SEARCH FOR AN AFRICAN IDENTITY

## Ministering to a Protean African

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### ***Principle and Foundation***

I WOULD LIKE TO BEGIN this reflection by recounting an experience that taught me much more about the doctrine of *imago Dei* than any theology class could have done. I lived in Senegal for two years in a Jesuit community. We had a calf bought from a Fulani—a member of a nomadic tribe found in the north of Cameroon, Nigeria, Guinea, Senegal and Niger. We did our best to feed it well and raised it under the best possible conditions a calf can hope for—not out of pure charity but for the meat we were hoping to get from it! Despite its five-star stable, our calf was restless and, even after staying for months with us, each time we forgot to close the fence it would escape and make its way back to its original owner. We wondered about this restlessness, and the Fulani explained to us that they usually give a brew to their animals so that, no matter how far away they stray from the herd, they will be able to find their way back. This brew is a kind of distinguishing mark for the animals. I will not go into the scientific character of such a claim.

Just like this calf we have a distinguishing mark; and that mark is God's. We are told in Genesis 1:27 that we have been created in God's image and likeness. This entails, among other things, that we have been made capable of relating to God, of having a share in God's own life. Just as the calf is restless until it returns to where it really belongs, we are restless as long as our hearts are far away from God. This is a reality echoed by the words of Saint Augustine of Hippo which we all know well: 'you made us for yourself and our hearts find no peace until they

rest in you'.<sup>1</sup> It is the same truth expressed by the psalmist when he cries out: 'O God, you are my God, I seek you, my soul thirsts for you; my flesh faints for you, as in a dry and weary land where there is no water' (Psalm 63:1).

Our entire Christian life consists in reappropriating the experience of our belovedness inherent in the fact of being created in God's image and likeness. Our spiritual identity thus lies in the fact of being God's beloved sons and daughters, irrespective of racial, religious, ethnic or cultural affiliations. I strongly believe that this should be the starting point, the unfolding and the ultimate goal of any reflection on identity carried out in the context of Christian spirituality.

This said, my reflection will be located at the frontiers of spiritual and cultural identity. It will be an effort to re-examine the question of an African identity in conjunction with Ignatian discernment. I will start by outlining the theoretical framework of my reflection, drawing abundantly on Fabien Eboussi Boulaga, a Cameroonian philosopher, read through the eyes of Eugène Goussikindey, a theologian from the Benin Republic. I will then proceed to apply this theoretical framework to the evolution of a discerning heart in Ignatius of Loyola to show the necessary connection between discernment and identity. The third part of my reflection will delve into spiritual direction proper, examining conditions of possibility of journeying with an African—or anyone—tempted by what Robert Jay Lifton has called the *protean* style of self-fulfilment.

### ***The Question of Identity***

There is great interest in questions of identity across a broad spectrum of academic disciplines. Considering this interest, one might expect it to be easy to find a simple and clear statement of what people mean when they use the concept of identity. However, this is not the case. A great majority of academic users of the word feel no need to explain its meaning to their readers at all. Readers' understanding is simply taken for granted. I shall not take your understanding of this concept for granted, but I shall equally not offer a formal definition. Like Eboussi Boulaga, I shall simply try to provide,

... a horizon within which the question of identity evolves as the African's ability to relate responsibly to the world through a 'project'.

<sup>1</sup> Augustine, *Confessions*, 1.1, translated by R. S. Pine-Coffin (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1961).

The project is but one's assumption of the determinations of his/her situation and one's deliberate orientation of his/her will and actions toward a chosen goal; it is another name for the 'making of self'.<sup>2</sup>

### ***The Encounter with the Other as the Context of Emergence of the Question of Identity***

Our world is multicultural and multireligious. To live in such a world entails constantly crossing borders that demarcate an overwhelming variety of languages, ethnicities, races, cultures and religions. According to Anne E. Patrick, borders perform at least three distinct roles: as markers of individual and communal identity; as hurdles to fence off those people different from oneself; and as frontiers from which to explore new horizons in expanding one's knowledge and circle of relationships.<sup>3</sup> Consequently, the question of one's identity usually arises within the context of an encounter with the *other*, be it a religious other, cultural other or indeed any form of alterity. The other becomes the background from which my particularity stands out. In this encounter:

The quest of identity begins when 'things fall apart'. It springs from within, in a face to face struggle with oneself, as one clearly perceives that one can no longer continue to hold on to one's 'old' particularity without a major change.<sup>4</sup>

This struggle is all the more dramatic when the particularity of the other claims universality and consequently tends to negate my own particularity. This is the case in the encounter of the African with the West—an encounter that brings about a crisis.

The etymology of 'crisis' (from the Greek *krino*: separate, judge, decide) suggests that this moment is above all a time for taking stock, a call to reconsider the foundations on which our understanding of self stands. This reappraisal is provoked by the awareness that something that was familiar and evident no longer is. The awareness leads to anxiety, uneasiness, tensions and dead ends. It calls for a sharpening of our

<sup>2</sup> Eugène Goussikindey, 'The Christic Model of Eboussi Boulaga: A Critical Exposition and Evaluation of an African "Recapture" of Christianity', doctoral dissertation, University of St Michael's College, 1997, 20.

<sup>3</sup> See Anne E. Patrick, 'Markers, Barriers, and Frontiers: Theology on the Borderlands', in *Theology: Expanding the Borders*, edited by María Pilar Aquino and Roberto S. Goizueta (Mystic: Twenty-Third Publications, 1998), 7–16.

<sup>4</sup> Goussikindey, 'Christic Model of Eboussi Boulaga', 11, citing Chinua Achebe, *Things Fall Apart* (London: Heinemann, 1958).

capacity to judge in order to discern the right course of action. Some of the questions faced by the African in this situation of crisis are formulated by Eboussi Boulaga in 'L'Aventure ambiguë de Cheikh Hamidou Kane':

Can the African resign himself or herself to surrender to the idea that his or her values have now demonstrated objectively their futility by their inability to oppose a successful resistance to the invader? Can he or she who has witnessed the collapse and the decomposition of his or her certitude, of what once has constituted the unchallenged substance of his or her life, find another one? Or is he or she condemned to the disenchanted scepticism of one who belongs to no culture, abandoning to the 'Power of Things' the direction of history?<sup>5</sup>

In trying to answer these questions, there are at least two pitfalls to be avoided. First, we should avoid the danger of seeking 'a quick and naïve poetic reconciliation' with a romanticized past.<sup>6</sup> Second, we should equally avoid embracing the protean style of self-fulfilment. Finally, it is worth remembering that, 'by grounding the question of identity in the encounter with the West, Eboussi does not primarily seek to confront and criticise the West. His focus is on Africans and their responsibility.'<sup>7</sup>

### **Poetic Reconciliation**

Giving in to poetic reconciliation means wanting to carry on with my old particularity as if nothing had happened, ignoring the imperative to discern a new course of action that every crisis places before us. The poetic reconciler indulges in apology for, and makes efforts to rehabilitate, a past viewed as a golden age. Such an effort tends to cast a veil over the ethical demands of responsibility. But, in fact, 'the future lies' not in resuscitating a romanticized past but in 'a deliberate decision of becoming the "agent" of one's own existence in the world'.<sup>8</sup> This calls for a critical reappropriation of the past that takes stock of moments of deprivation (moments of *desolation*) as well as moments of plenty (moments of *consolation*).

<sup>5</sup> Fabien Eboussi Boulaga, 'L'Aventure ambiguë de Cheikh Hamidou Kane', *Abbia*, 6 (1964), 207–215, here 211. Translated by Eugène Goussikindey in 'Christic Model of Eboussi Boulaga', 9. See also *Christianisme sans fétiche* (Paris: Présence Africaine, 1981), 8.

<sup>6</sup> Goussikindey, 'Christic Model of Eboussi Boulaga', 7. He adds in a footnote: 'The expression "poetic reconciliation" has been suggested by Eboussi's later characterization of some attempts to bridge African and Western cultures as "synthèse verbale" .... *Synthèse verbale* is a disguised ideological discourse ....'

<sup>7</sup> Goussikindey, 'Christic Model of Eboussi Boulaga', 10.

<sup>8</sup> Goussikindey, 'Christic Model of Eboussi Boulaga', 16.

## Protean Self-fulfilment

### *The Protean Person*

We encounter Proteus in the *Odyssey* of Homer. He is a god of the sea, charged with tending the flocks of sea-creatures belonging to Poseidon. He lives on the island of Pharos and has the ability to change himself into whatever form he desires. He makes the most of this aptitude, particularly when trying to evade those who



ask him questions. In fact he has the gift of prophecy, but is reluctant to give information to mortals who seek it from him. On the advice of the sea-goddess Idothea, Proteus' own daughter, Menelaus went to question him. Although Proteus metamorphosed himself successively into a lion, a serpent, a panther, an enormous boar, water and a tree, Menelaus did not let him escape. Finally defeated, Proteus spoke to him.<sup>9</sup>

From Proteus' multifarious nature is derived the adjective *protean*, meaning 'versatile', 'mutable', 'capable of assuming many forms'. In *History and Human Survival*, the psychohistorian Robert Jay Lifton uses this adjective to describe contemporary human beings. For him, two general historical developments account for the emergence of protean man or woman: *historical (or psychohistorical) dislocation* and the *flooding of imagery*.<sup>10</sup>

Psychohistorical dislocation refers to,

... the break in the sense of connection which men and women have long felt with the vital and nourishing symbols of their cultural tradition—symbols revolving around family, idea-systems, religions, and the life cycle in general.<sup>11</sup>

<sup>9</sup> See 'Proteus', in Pierre Grimal, *The Concise Dictionary of Classical Mythology*, edited by Stephen Kershaw from the translation by A. R. Maxwell-Hyslop (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1990), 377–378.

<sup>10</sup> Robert Jay Lifton, *History and Human Survival: Essays on the Young and Old, Survivors and the Dead, Peace and War, and on Contemporary Psychohistory* (New York: Vintage Books, 1971), 318.

<sup>11</sup> Lifton, *History and Human Survival*, 318.

In our contemporary world these traditional symbols are, more often than not, perceived as extraneous, onerous or inoperative. Different reasons account for psychohistorical dislocation in different contexts. In the case of Africa in its encounter with the West, it appears that the root causes are to be found in two painful historical experiences: slavery and colonialism. These two phenomena have both ripped away the human dignity of Africans, plunging them into what Engelbert Mveng, a Cameroonian historian and theologian, terms *paupérisation anthropologique* (anthropological poverty). This is manifest in the fact that many have developed a negative self-image and, even more, an almost complete mistrust of the basic tenets of their own cultural traditions, which are perceived as having failed to prevent these two tragedies from happening. For many generations of Africans, *to be* has meant to negate one's *Africanness*. In many regards, this negation is still very present, even though it is often unconscious. It is expressed in a preference for imported value systems and the tendency to look up to the *other* for approbation when taking a step in the direction of self-fulfilment.

**We are caught  
up between  
different worlds**

The second historical element to which Lifton attributes the emergence of the protean man and woman is the flooding of imagery, produced by the amazing gush of postmodern cultural influences over mass communication networks. These networks readily transcend local and national frontiers, and allow each individual to be touched by everything, but at the same time to be besieged by superficial messages and undigested cultural material, by headlines and by endless partial alternatives in every sphere of life. These alternatives, furthermore, are universally and simultaneously shared—if not as courses of action, at least in the form of significant 'inner imagery'.<sup>12</sup> This has given rise to diffused identities. We are caught up between different worlds with different value systems. We look for a cultural universe that we can call home, split as we are between the desire to cling to the security of our traditions and the fear of missing the passing train of contemporary cultural trends. The result is a loss of the sense of belonging which in turn leads to a culture of the *hic et nunc*. What matters is what gives meaning to my wandering *being*, here and now. The future is at best a chimera, at worst it presents the terrifying prospect of our nightmares entering the realm of reality.

<sup>12</sup> Lifton, *History and Human Survival*, 318.

The protean style of self-realisation or self-fulfilment is characterized by ‘an interminable series of experiments and explorations—some shallow, some profound—each of which may be readily abandoned in favour of still new psychological quests’.<sup>13</sup> It consists in changing the appearance of the self as circumstances require, just as Proteus assumed different shapes. As a result of this diffused identity, the protean man or woman may suffer from a number of impaired psychological behaviours. But Lifton stresses that,

The protean style is by no means pathological as such, and in fact may well be one of the functional patterns of our day. It extends to all areas of human experience—to political as well as sexual behaviour, to the holding and promulgating of ideas, and to the general organization of lives.<sup>14</sup>

Furthermore, the classical superego, that is, ‘the internalization of clearly defined criteria of right and wrong transmitted with a particular culture by parents to their children’, has disappeared in the protean man or woman.<sup>15</sup> Protean human beings demand freedom from that kind of superego, claim for themselves a symbolic fatherlessness in order to have the freedom to carry out their explorations. Thus, the protean readily rejects any form of authority, eager as he or she is to go through a variety of experiences in search of self-fulfilment. This attitude is paradoxical. While proteans abhor any form of authority, they nonetheless express the need for yardsticks, for models around which to build their identity. This is made obvious in expressions such as: ‘I love Jesus Christ, but I hate the damn Church!’ The protean would like to identify with Jesus Christ as a model, but perceives the Church and its ministers as hindrances on the way to what he or she considers as self-fulfilment. The protean would say: ‘I’m spiritual but I’m not religious’.

### ***The Logic of Self: A Pragmatic Reappropriation***

Poetic reconciliation and the protean style of self-fulfilment are both inadequate in addressing a crisis of identity. In poetic reconciliation, ‘this quick rehabilitation of African culture and thought still treats Africans as an “object of discourse” and not yet as a “subject of discourse”’.<sup>16</sup> The

<sup>13</sup> Lifton, *History and Human Survival*, 319.

<sup>14</sup> Lifton, *History and Human Survival*, 319.

<sup>15</sup> Lifton, *History and Human Survival*, 321–322.

<sup>16</sup> Goussikindey, ‘Christic Model of Eboussi Boulaga’, 15.

protean style of self-fulfilment falls short of the necessary reappropriation that should accompany every genuine quest for authenticity. What then is the way forward? For Eboussi, this consists in becoming a subject of one's own history.

If the 'identity' of Black-African is that of a *subject and not of an object*, it is that of a *being who determines himself* to be by re-appropriating as his own what he has discovered, by *establishing aims in order to fulfil himself*.<sup>17</sup>

In this passage, as Eugène Goussikindey explains:

Eboussi gives primacy to the acts of responsibility by which the subject determines itself ....

Initiative and responsibility in the present historical context for subsuming and transforming one's condition, one's 'facticity' into a destiny are now the constant invariable elements in the equation of 'identity'. The past is not simply discarded; it becomes an integral part of the memory (to be kept alive) of what had contributed or had rendered possible the historical treatment of the African as object, that is, 'being a means in regard to other things or other people, being integrated into someone else's project as raw material and ingredient'.<sup>18</sup>

It is at the level of this task of reappropriation, indispensable in identity-building, that Ignatian discernment can prove useful, especially in spiritual direction with someone who is tempted by the protean style of self-fulfilment. I shall now examine how this can be done, starting with the conversion experience of Ignatius, in which his teaching on discernment is rooted, and then proceeding to consider some of the conditions of possibility of journeying with a protean, whether African or not, in a context of spiritual direction.

### ***Ignatius' Conversion Experience: Discernment as Reappropriation of Lived Experience***

Ignatius was gravely injured by a cannonball at the siege of Pamplona. During his convalescence, he desired to read something to pass the time. As he himself mentions, 'he was much given to reading worldly

<sup>17</sup> Eboussi Boulaga, 'L'identité négro-africaine', *Présence Africaine*, 99–100 (1976), 3. Translated by Goussikindey, in 'Christic Model of Eboussi Boulaga', 17.

<sup>18</sup> Goussikindey, 'Christic Model of Eboussi Boulaga', 17–18.

books of fiction, commonly labelled chivalry' and was very attracted by novels such as *Amadis de Gaule* that dealt with knightly exploits.<sup>19</sup> Up to this point, the desire for worldly honour and self-affirmation had been and continued to be the driving force for all his decisions.<sup>20</sup>

Up to his twenty-sixth year the heart of Ignatius was enthralled by the vanities of the world. His special delight was in the military life, and he seemed led by a strong and empty desire of gaining for himself a great name.<sup>21</sup>

Having failed to find any books to his liking, he read the only two books available: the *Vita Christi* (Life of Christ) and the *Flos Sanctorum* (Lives of the Saints). The adjectives used by Ignatius to characterize the books he used to be interested in before his injury are *mundanos y falsos* (worldly and false). These adjectives give us a glimpse of the character of his conversion. It is not only a passage from the world to God, from sin to grace, but also from falsehood to truth, from worldly passion to spiritual discernment. As he himself describes it, the conversion was realised as a process of *election*.<sup>22</sup> The discernment of spirits plays an important role in this process, to which God introduced Ignatius. As Gonçalves da Câmara, Ignatius' first biographer, observed: 'This was his first reflection on the things of God; and later, when he composed the Exercises, this was his starting point in clarifying the matter of diversity of spirits'.<sup>23</sup>



<sup>19</sup> *Autobiography*, n. 5.

<sup>20</sup> John Joseph, 'Evolution of a Discerning Heart in Ignatius as Seen in the *Autobiography*', *Ignis*, 42/1 (2012), 9.

<sup>21</sup> *Autobiography*, n.1.

<sup>22</sup> *Autobiography*, nn. 6–10

<sup>23</sup> Da Câmara's marginal note to the text of the *Autobiography*, n. 8.

Reading the *Vita Christi* and the *Flos Sanctorum*, Ignatius encountered a reality different from that of his world of chivalry. This encounter plunged him into a crisis. What he had always taken for granted was suddenly placed in question by his reading. Life seemed to be much more than just running after the glory that comes from the world. Faced with this crisis, Ignatius had to avoid the two pitfalls mentioned above:

1. ***Attempting a poetic reconciliation with a romanticised past***, that is, returning to his old ways: this would have meant ignoring the new variable brought into the equation by his encounter with God through his readings.
2. ***Embracing a protean style of self-fulfilment***, by *imitating* the life of St Dominic or St Francis ('What if I should do what St Francis did? What if I should act like St Dominic?').<sup>24</sup> *Acting like* .... This is a step in the right direction but it is not enough. For Ignatius it gave way to a discernment process that would ultimately lead him to dedicate his entire life to the service of the divine majesty through the help offered to souls, according to God's calling and in his own unique way, not simply by *acting like* ....

What happened during Ignatius' conversion experience and subsequent spiritual journey was a reappropriation of his lived experience. He took stock of the different motions of the spirit and made the decisions that would lead him to a life lived in conformity with God's will. This experience would later be codified in the book of the *Spiritual Exercises*. Ignatius indicated the purpose of these exercises as being to help exercitants not to leave anything to fate or to reach a decision through any inordinate attachment, but actively to collaborate with God to discover their own special way of being a man or a woman in this world and of conforming their entire lives to the discovered reality: 'spiritual exercises to overcome oneself, and to order one's life, without reaching a decision through some disordered affection' (Exx 21). This was truly to become the subject of their own history.

### ***Conditions of Possibility for Journeying with a Protean***

Spiritual direction entails at least three concomitant relationships. The primary relationship is that between the seeker and God. However two

<sup>24</sup> *Autobiography*, n. 7.

other relationships must be strong if the process is to be truly effective. The guide needs to have a deep relationship with God and there should equally exist a viable and secure spiritual friendship between guide and seeker. Only if these three relationships are strong can spiritual direction proceed effectively.<sup>25</sup> Here, I shall mainly focus on the relationship between the seeker and the guide.

First, Ignatius invites the guide not to interfere with God's work in the seeker. He or she should not incline in one direction or the other, but rather, 'while standing by like the pointer of a scale in equilibrium ... allow the Creator to deal immediately with the creature and the creature with its Creator and Lord' (Exx 15). The guide's endeavour should consist in helping seekers to discover areas of non-freedom within themselves so that, getting rid of inordinate attachments, they may choose that which leads them to a more intimate relationship with God.

Second, there is need for awareness that dealing with a protean means dealing with someone marked, as we mentioned above, by a symbolic fatherlessness: the rejection of the classical superego and ultimately of all kinds of authority figures. This makes it more demanding for the guide to create a comfortable space where proteans can feel secure to tell their story and consequently be helped in reappropriating their lived experiences in a way that fills their life with meaning. This calls for a necessary adaptation of the role of the guide, who becomes a *cultural translator*. In this adaptation, the guide should be disposed to do three things: first, to provide the space where the protean's life experiences can be appraised by both seeker and guide as plausible arenas of God's action; secondly, to challenge the protean style in the light of the gospel; and thus, thirdly, to open the way for the advent of an alternative culture, which will be the fruit of the reappropriation of the person's history (past, present, future).

Third, considering the fact that the protean style of self-fulfilment consists in an interminable series of experiments and explorations which each constitute a different mask, the guide should learn how to follow the protean along the many paths of his or her experiences without losing sight of the ultimate goal: helping the protean in the process of reappropriation through which he or she takes responsibility for his or her historicity.

<sup>25</sup> Alice McDowell, 'The Three Dimensions of Spiritual Direction', *Review for Religious*, 40 (1981), 391.

Ignatian discernment is not simply an art or a technique. It is a way of life. It is a life lived under the mode of crisis, in other words as a perpetual pilgrimage, attentive to the promptings of God's spirit in order to offer an appropriate response. I have tried to show that it can be useful in carrying out the work of reappropriation necessary in every genuine quest for identity—for Africans and for us all.

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