

THE CONTEMPLATION TO ATTAIN LOVE AS AN EXPERIENCE OF PENTECOST

Theological Implications

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THE FINAL MEDITATION in the *Spiritual Exercises* of St Ignatius Loyola is the Contemplation to Attain Love, with its concluding prayer, 'Take and receive'. It sums up the Four Weeks of the Exercises by asking retreatants to ponder first God's gifts to them in creation, then God's presence in those gifts and finally God's 'labour', or activity, in them, so as better to respond in gratitude to God's gift and, more importantly, to God's Self as the Divine Giver.

It recapitulates, therefore, the deeper aim of the triune God in salvation history. Initially in the work of Creation, then through the life, death and resurrection of Jesus as the Word Incarnate, and finally in the sending of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost, the divine persons have made themselves present to their creatures, not as transcendent Creator and Lord, but in terms of an intimate intersubjective relation. This is true of human beings in the first place but, analogously, of all other creatures as well. Yet to understand and interpret to others the way in which the divine persons are interiorly present to each sentient creature, co-experiencing its (conscious or unconscious) joys and sufferings, it helps to have some grasp of how intersubjectivity works both in human consciousness and, to some extent, in the self-awareness of other sentient creatures. Here, in my judgment, Alfred North Whitehead's metaphysics of universal subjectivity (namely, the notion of actual entities—momentary self-constituting subjects of experience—in ongoing dynamic interrelation) could be quite useful in explaining to retreatants the dynamic of intersubjectivity in the *Spiritual Exercises*.¹

¹ See Alfred North Whitehead, *Process and Reality: An Essay in Cosmology*, edited by David Ray Griffin and Donald W. Sherburne (New York: Free Press, 1978), 18.



Pentecost, fourteenth-century fresco, St Vitus's Cathedral, Prague

Accordingly, in what follows I shall first summarise the various 'points' in the Contemplation and indicate how, in my judgment, this final meditation of the Spiritual Exercises might well correspond to what the disciples in the upper room experienced through the coming of the Holy Spirit on Pentecost Sunday. Then I shall turn to how this same experience of the Holy Spirit motivated the disciples to spread the Good News of salvation through Jesus Christ to the very people who had consented to Jesus' crucifixion by the Roman authorities only a few weeks earlier. The concluding meditation of the Spiritual Exercises could be said to send the retreatant forth into the world like the disciples at Pentecost, with a new sense of purpose in life.

The Contemplation to Attain Love

Ignatius begins the Contemplation to Attain Love with two important 'preliminary observations', which indicate that he was consciously thinking in terms of an intersubjective relation between God and the retreatant:

First. Love ought to manifest itself more by deeds than by words.

Second. Love consists in a mutual communication between two persons. That is, the one who loves gives and communicates to the beloved what he or she has, or a part of what one has or can have; and the beloved in return does the same to the lover. Thus, if one has knowledge, one gives it to the other, who does not; and similarly, in regard to honours or riches. Each shares with the other. (Exx 230–231)

There is, to be sure, no explicit mention of the gift of the self, but only of what the self has. But this readily implies a gift of the self in terms of what the person holds dear.

Then, after a pair of 'Preludes' by way of mood-setting for the meditation, Ignatius, as noted above, sets forth in four points the material for the meditation. First, one remembers all the gifts that one has received, beginning with one's creation and personal redemption. Second, one considers ...

... how God dwells in creatures; in the elements, giving them existence; in the plants giving them life; in the animals, giving them sensation; in human beings, giving them intelligence; and finally, how in this way he dwells also in myself, giving me existence, life, sensation, and intelligence; even further, making me his temple, since I am created as a likeness and image of the Divine Mystery.

Third, one considers 'how God labours and works for me in all the creatures on the face of the earth; that is, he acts in the manner of one who is labouring'. Fourth, one considers 'how all good things and gifts descend from above; for example, my limited power from the Supreme and Infinite Power above; and so of justice, goodness, piety, mercy, and so forth' (Exx 232–237).

After each of these points, Ignatius urges retreatants to offer themselves to God in the following colloquy:

Take, Lord, and receive all my liberty, my memory, my understanding, and all my will—all that I have and possess. You, Lord, have given all that to me. I now give it back to you, O Lord. All of it is yours. Dispose of it according to your will. Give me love of yourself along with your grace, for that is enough for me. (Exx 234)

The focus here on a strictly intersubjective relation between God and the retreatant is quite remarkable. It could only have come about through Ignatius' sustained reflection on his own spiritual journey. So, in the colloquies at the end of each meditation in the Spiritual Exercises—but, above all, in the colloquy for the Contemplation—Ignatius used the language of love. He addressed God more as divine Lover rather than as Lord and Creator of the universe.

Pentecost

Does this interpersonal encounter between God and the retreatant in the Contemplation roughly correspond to what the disciples of Jesus presumably experienced at Pentecost, with the coming of the Holy Spirit

and their spontaneous response to God's overpowering presence and activity in their lives? In both cases there is a strong spiritual experience which is orientated towards the future. Jesus, after all, had told the disciples before his ascension that they would shortly be 'baptized with the Holy Spirit' (Acts 1:5): hence they should not mourn his forthcoming departure since he would return and be present to them, as individuals and as a group, much more powerfully than before in and through the presence and activity of the Holy Spirit in their lives. In a similar way, Ignatius uses the Contemplation to send retreatants back into the world of everyday life with a new sense of personal mission to spread the Good News to all they will encounter in the days to come.

St Paul clearly had a similar life-changing experience on the road to Damascus and, in his epistle to the Galatians, exclaimed: 'I have been crucified with Christ; and it is no longer I who live, but it is Christ who lives in me' (Galatians 2:19–20). Here, too, not only is Paul grateful for a new relationship with God through the risen Jesus, but he feels the presence and activity of the Lord in all that he says and does. The overwhelming experience of God's love calls forth from the



The Conversion on the Way to Damascus, by
Caravaggio

individual a full return of love, to the point where he no longer feels any strong sense of the self as distinct from God. His selfhood has been taken over by the selfhood of Jesus as the divine Lover: 'I live by faith in the Son of God who has loved me and given himself up for me' (Galatians 2:20). Stepping back from the dynamic of the Spiritual Exercises for a moment, we may ask whether the loss of individual identity in such an experience of a transcendent relation with Christ is achievable, not just for a privileged moment of interpersonal encounter, but for a lifetime.

This is, after all, not to claim that we would live in a continual state of ecstasy, but only to acknowledge that, at every moment, we unconsciously try to fill up the natural feeling of emptiness within ourselves through identification with other persons and things. We achieve our selfhood or personhood by accepting our necessary interconnection with them in order to become ourselves. Hence, it was perfectly natural for the Apostles, St Paul and others to feel the overpowering presence of the Lord in their work of spreading the gospel after Pentecost. It is, accordingly, equally possible that a retreatant could end the retreat with a strong sense of union with Christ in all that he or she says and does, by virtue of the Spiritual Exercises as a whole but, in a special way, as a result of making the Contemplation to Attain Love and reciting the colloquy fervently at the end of each point.

To explain further what I mean by a metaphysics of intersubjectivity in this context, I shall now say something about Martin Buber's understanding of 'I-Thou' and 'I-It' relations, then compare it with the Trinitarian theology of the late Colin Gunton in his book *The One, the Three and the Many* and, finally, offer a Whiteheadian revision of this new paradigm for the relationship between the One and the Many that Gunton sets out.²

I and Thou

Martin Buber's book *I and Thou* was truly revolutionary from a philosophical perspective, even as it describes what is in many ways a commonplace experience from a religious one. René Descartes had shifted the starting-point of Western metaphysics from the objectively conceived cause-and-effect relationships of Aristotle and Thomas Aquinas to the subjectivity of the individual knower.³ But this effort at starting philosophy from an empirical rather than a logical perspective was only partially successful. It effectively made the individual subject of experience the master of its own internal world, but at the same time cut off from the real world except in terms of its own representations of reality (its sensations and concepts). Whether these mental representations really corresponded to external reality was impossible for the individual to decide alone. Eventually Immanuel Kant and the German Idealists tried

² Much of what follows is a summary of the argument of Joseph A. Bracken, *Subjectivity, Objectivity and Intersubjectivity: A New Paradigm for Religion and Science* (West Conshohocken: Templeton Foundation, 2009).

³ Bracken, *Subjectivity, Objectivity and Intersubjectivity*, 28–31.

to bridge this ontological gap by claiming that the laws governing the scientific knowledge of reality were *a priori* structures of the human mind.⁴ Thus, for the German Idealists even more than for Kant, the real world was a systematically organized creation of the human or divine mind in which Absolute Spirit reigned.

In the light of his religious experience, Buber rejected this paradigm for the relation of subjectivity and objectivity in favour of intersubjectivity—‘I-Thou’ relations—as the starting-point for philosophical and theological reflection. He began by analyzing three basic words: I, Thou and It. Among the logical relations between these words, he distinguished ‘I-Thou’ and

**The
interpersonal
relation
between two
human beings**

‘I-It’ relations. I-Thou relations exist between two or more subjects in dynamic interrelation. I-It relations exist between the individual ‘I’ and the objects, animate and inanimate, of its own mental world. ‘There is no I taken in itself, but only the I of the primary word I-Thou and the I of the primary word I-It’.⁵

Buber clearly regarded I-Thou relations as superior to I-It relations, but claims that the I-Thou relation is a fleeting moment in the interpersonal relation between two human beings or between human beings and God as the Infinite Thou.⁶ As children, to be sure, we live in an I-Thou world, not only with respect to other human beings but also towards all living and non-living things that we can see and touch.⁷ But, as we get older and become more accustomed to ‘means-end’ thinking, we regularly shift to I-It relations, even in dealing with people. The I-Thou relationship thus becomes limited to intimate interpersonal encounters.⁸

The One, the Three and the Many

In his book *The One, the Three and the Many*, Colin Gunton calls attention to the fact that the I-It relation is an example of the classical paradigm for the One and the Many, in which the One orders the Many as subordinate to itself in various ways.⁹ To establish the I-Thou relationship between human beings as normal, he proposes a new paradigm for the One and the Many based on the doctrine of the Trinity, whereby the three

⁴ Bracken, *Subjectivity, Objectivity and Intersubjectivity*, 54–88.

⁵ Martin Buber, *I and Thou*, translated by Ronald Gregor Smith (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons), 4.

⁶ Buber, *I and Thou*, 16–17.

⁷ Buber, *I and Thou*, 25–28.

⁸ Buber, *I and Thou*, 8–9.

⁹ Colin E. Gunton, *The One, the Three and the Many: God, Creation and the Culture of Modernity* (Cambridge: CUP, 1993), 16–21.

divine persons, through their dynamic interrelation, are one God, not three gods in close association.¹⁰ The key concept here is the classical notion of *perichoresis*, coordinated movement or interdependence.¹¹

This is certainly an advance beyond the position of Buber in *I and Thou*. The I-Thou relation is, at least in principle, accessible to human beings on a permanent instead of a momentary basis. But, in my judgment, it still falls short of what is needed philosophically to establish the I-Thou relationship permanently, not only with other human beings but, analogously, with all the other creatures of this world. Gunton addresses this issue when he proposes that *perichoresis* should be applicable to signify a world marked by relationality at all levels of existence and activity:

Do we live in a world that can be understood relationally on all its levels? If things can be so understood, if to be temporal and spatial is to echo in some way, however faintly, the being of God, may we not find in this concept a way of holding things together that modernity so signally lacks.¹²

But what is still missing is an ontological explanation of how *perichoresis* can apply to animate and inanimate things as well as to human beings.

Actual Entities and Perichoresis

Keeping this in mind, I turn now to Whitehead's notion of actual entities and the societies into which they aggregate, as possibly a better model for the notion of universal intersubjectivity that Gunton foresees as a direct consequence of a Trinitarian world-view.¹³ My own revision of the understanding of the One and the Many from an evolutionary perspective certainly comes closer to what Gunton proposes from his Trinitarian viewpoint, but I argue, with the help of Whitehead, that it should be possible to establish this new understanding of the relation between the One and the Many on purely rational rather than faith-based grounds.

In this way people such as Buber, who do not profess belief in God as triune, can still find it at least plausible. I claim, then, that reality is intrinsically social, in that individual entities necessarily exist as part or

¹⁰ Gunton, *The One, the Three and the Many*, 149–154.

¹¹ Gunton, *The One, the Three and the Many*, 152.

¹² Gunton, *The One, the Three and the Many*, 165–166.

¹³ Since he was a philosopher, not a theologian, Whitehead, unlike Gunton, did not ground his understanding of the relation between the One and the Many in the Christian doctrine of the Trinity but in an analysis of the history of early modern science from an evolutionary or change-orientated perspective. See Alfred North Whitehead, *Science and the Modern World* (New York: Free Press), 1–112.

members of groups of similarly constituted individuals. Human beings, other animal species, plants, even similarly constituted inanimate things can thus be said to belong to societies or organizations of some kind. As already noted, individuals themselves Whitehead calls 'actual entities'. The distinctive feature of what he means by 'actual entity' is that it is not a generic thing but a momentary self-constituting subject of experience.¹⁴ It is equivalently a mini-organism in a world of organisms, both very large and quite small.

The advantage of using the model of actual entities as the parts or members of all the 'societies' that exist in the world is that, as interrelated subjects of experience, they have internal rather than purely external relations to one another.¹⁵ That is, these momentary subjects of experience are influential in one another's internal self-organization. They equivalently get inside one another and thereby together produce a higher-order, specifically social, entity with a definite 'common element of form' or 'defining characteristic'.¹⁶ In this sense, the actual entities exercise bottom-up causation in producing a whole bigger than themselves as individual entities. But that common element of form or defining characteristic then exercises top-down causation on the next generation of actual entities (momentary subjects of experience) as they come into existence within the field of activity proper to the 'society' (for example, an atom as composed of subatomic particles). The result is that from different perspectives the parts or members determine the structure of the whole and the whole influences without controlling the individualised structure of each of the parts or members. The parts or members of the whole, in other words, are not carbon-copies of one another in their individual pattern of self-constitution.¹⁷ Each has its own ontological identity even as it co-constitutes with the other parts or members the higher-order society to which they all belong.

By implication then the parts or members of a Whiteheadian society exhibit the same *perichoretic* relation to one another that Gunton ascribes, in the first place, to the persons of the Trinity, but then wishes to extend to human beings in their relations with one another and with all the animate and inanimate things of this world. As dynamically interrelated subjects of experience, actual entities exist in a 'I-Thou relation' towards

¹⁴ Whitehead, *Process and Reality*, 18.

¹⁵ Whitehead, *Science and the Modern World*, 123.

¹⁶ Whitehead, *Process and Reality*, 34.

¹⁷ Whitehead, *Process and Reality*, 22–23.

one another and co-constitute by their influence on one another's internal self-constitution the 'We-relation' which defines their identity as a society or specifically social reality. Thus, this modest rethinking of how Whitehead understands the relation of actual entities to the societies that they co-constitute seems to work quite nicely to affirm what Gunton proposed as a properly Trinitarian God-world relationship without being able to establish it on purely rational grounds.

The Dynamic of the Spiritual Exercises

To return, then, to the context of Ignatius' Contemplation to Attain Love at the end of the Spiritual Exercises, we can with full confidence state that God truly 'labours' with the creatures of this world—principally human beings, as rational agents, but also all other creatures, both animate and inanimate. At the same time, there is no compulsion for the creature to cooperate with God in the work of creation. Whitehead claims that God communicates to every actual entity, in its momentary process of self-constitution, an 'initial aim' urging, but not obliging, it to shape itself in line with the divine plan for the world of creation.¹⁸ Rather like actual grace, classically understood, the initial aim from God urges the actual entity to make its self-constituting decision one way in preference to the alternatives. But, again like actual grace, it does not force compliance with what it recommends to the entity in its moment of 'decision'. I myself would add that the divine initial aim not only directs the



Pentecost, by Titian

¹⁸ Whitehead, *Process and Reality*, 244.



Pentecost, by a fifteenth-century Bohemian master

actual entity to constitute itself one way rather than another but also, like traditional actual grace, empowers it to make a self-constituting decision of any kind, whether for good or for ill.

In my judgment the Spiritual Exercises of St Ignatius constitute a progressive inner movement for the retreatant from a more or less rational reflection on our human relation to God in the Principle and Foundation, to an intense, feeling-orientated moment of interpersonal encounter with God

in the colloquy of the Contemplation to Attain Love. Admittedly, some commentators on the Spiritual Exercises have expressed the view that both of these meditations can be the subject of prayer and reflection all through the Four Weeks of the full Exercises.¹⁹

Without basically disagreeing with this assessment as a matter of spiritual practice, I nevertheless think that seeing these two meditations as the ‘book-ends’ of the Exercises is also useful. A first reading of the Principle and Foundation, after all, seems to be simply a matter of spiritual common sense: ‘Human beings are created to praise, reverence, and serve God our Lord, and by means of doing this to save their souls’. Likewise, in the effort to attain proper balance in using the things of this world, the retreatant is urged to use considerable caution: ‘we ought to use these things to the extent that they help us towards our end, and free ourselves from them to the extent that they hinder us from it’. Thus our sole aim is ‘to desire and choose only that which is more conducive to the end for which we are created’ (Exx 23).

Unquestionably this strong appeal to make sometimes difficult choices in line with God’s plan for the salvation of the world can be emotionally stirring. But, as I see it, its deeper value for retreatants is that it prepares

¹⁹ See, for example, Michael Ivens, *Understanding the Spiritual Exercises* (Leominster: Gracewing, 1998), 169–170. See also Joseph Tetlow, ‘The Fundamentum: Creation in the Principle and Foundation’, *Studies in the Spirituality of Jesuits*, 21/4 (September, 1989); Wilkie Au, ‘Ignatian Service: Gratitude and Love in Action’, *Studies in the Spirituality of Jesuits*, 40/2 (Summer, 2008).

them wholeheartedly to enter into the First Week, with its sustained reflection on the unhappy consequences of sin, both for the individual and for the human race as a whole. These reflections, in turn, prepare them to accept the Call of the Eternal King in the Kingdom meditation at the start of the Second Week and thus to move from a focus primarily on themselves and their rational relation to God to a more directly personal engagement with a transcendent cause—that is, in union with Christ to spread the Kingdom of God throughout the world.

This will certainly require personal asceticism, but it is an asceticism undertaken, not simply because it is the rational thing to do, but because it progressively deepens their relation to Christ as their Leader and Hero in the struggle against the powers of evil, both within themselves and within the world at large. Something like love, an interpersonal relation with Christ, has taken the place of rational reflection on the ultimate goal in life. During the Third Week they share with Christ the difficulty of pursuing this transcendent goal, and in the Fourth Week they rejoice with Christ that death itself cannot permanently set back its achievement.

But one further step is needed in this ultimate overcoming of preoccupation with the self and personal success or failure in life. In the Contemplation to Attain Love, with its focus on God (or Christ) as the Divine Lover, who is present within the self and labours with the self to achieve the sought-after goal of full interpersonal communion with God as an intimate companion in life, we abandon caution in the colloquy.

Many a retreatant (myself included) has found it difficult to experience this climactic moment with total sincerity. We still have not entered into the full movement of the Exercises which, in the end, demands all that we have and are, not simply as a matter of rational choice, but with total trust in him whom we have come to love dearly. Perhaps that is why Jesuits and other enthusiasts of the Exercises make them every year. As married people will attest, it takes a lifetime truly to love and trust a partner in life.

Finally, returning to my original proposal, can we say that the Contemplation to Attain Divine Love is a repetition of the Pentecost experience of the disciples in the upper room two thousand years ago? Quite honestly, there is no way to know what the followers of Jesus experienced then. But it seems fair to ask whether the early Church would have developed so fast within a relatively hostile Jewish context and a sceptical Gentile world unless those who preached the message

of the gospel radiated an unusual confidence that they had something crucially important to convey to their listeners. Does it not make sense that Ignatius had something similarly in mind for the retreatant on completing the Spiritual Exercises?²⁰

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²⁰ See Monty Williams, *The Gift of Spiritual Intimacy: Following the Spiritual Exercises of Saint Ignatius* (Richmond Hill: Novalis, 2009), 280: 'Now, in the Fourth Week, we are offered the same Spirit that was given at Pentecost, so that we can live in the world creatively, joyfully, and fully alive.' Thus in his view, the Contemplation to Attain Love as equivalently a meditation on Pentecost is a kind of 'Big Bang' in terms of renewed spiritual intimacy with the triune God.