

ADAPTATIONS OF THE SPIRITUAL EXERCISES

An Example from Africa

Chikere Ugwuanyi

THERE HAVE BEEN MANY ATTEMPTS to adapt the Spiritual Exercises of St Ignatius of Loyola for various needs and for various people. Of note are adaptations for the Twelve Step movement, for environmentalism, for social justice and for the laity.¹ There are also adaptations embedded in the *Spiritual Exercises* itself, such as the Eighteenth and Nineteenth Annotations, in which Ignatius suggests modifications to ‘dispositions of the persons who wish to receive them’ and for those ‘taken up with public affairs or suitable business’.² Even with standard three-day, eight-day and thirty-day retreats, directors can attest that each retreat (and retreatant) is unique and the course of a retreat always changes. It seems that the only constancy is the dynamic of the Spiritual Exercises.

My aim here is to consider that dynamic in terms of something that is often forgotten: adaptation for those living in a *specific space*, such as the continent of Africa. I intend to do two things: first, I shall argue that the geographical entity called Africa has a uniqueness which makes it a very particular space affecting the dynamism of the Spiritual Exercises. I shall try to show how *embodiment* in Africa bears on how retreatants makes sense of the world and on the world-views they adopt, and why it is important to consider space in giving the Spiritual Exercises or spiritual direction. Secondly, I shall suggest some practical guidelines, offering methods and nuances for effective geographical adaptation.

¹ See Jim Harbaugh, *A 12-Step Approach to the Spiritual Exercises of St Ignatius* (London: Sheed and Ward, 1997); Roger Haight, ‘Expanding the Spiritual Exercises’, *Studies in the Spirituality of Jesuits*, 42/2 (Summer 2010); Claudio Burgaleta, ‘Ignatian Spirituality and Social Justice Ministries’, *Review of Ignatian Spirituality* (CIS), 111 (2006). Most of the Nineteenth Annotation adaptations are for lay people who do not have the time or resources to undertake the thirty-day versions. For a fuller understanding of the various renewals and adaptations, see the Georgetown University video, *The Spiritual Exercises: Renewal and Dynamics*, produced by Frank Frost Productions.

² All quotations from *The Spiritual Exercises of St Ignatius of Loyola*, translated by Elder Mullan (New York: P. J. Kenedy, 1914).



Spirituality and Space

Essentially I am writing about the significance of space in spiritual life. We experience space in many ways. We feel different in an open field and in a crowded street. Crowded spaces can cause claustrophobia and make some people feel tense and constricted, whereas open space may help them feel more relaxed. Open space generally feels better than crowded space. Health-care specialists continue to document how (open) space affects human health—mental, physical and spiritual.³ When we breathe better, we think better, we feel better, we move better and we are better. Space, as we shall see, enables the physical and the spiritual to interact seamlessly. Space supports solitude, but also provides a context for the creation of community. Spiritual life requires solitude—because we need, not only private moments for prayer and reflection, but also solitude to experience a deeper sense of self. But spiritual life also requires community: faith has more meaning in the company of like minds.

The physical space called Africa, as I shall demonstrate, is a spiritual space. As a geographical reality, it has features that its inhabitants can use to help in their spiritual growth. In fact, African topography is intrinsic to the spiritual life of Africans. So the Spiritual Exercises will make more sense to Africans if the physical space of Africa is taken into account in adapting Ignatius' insights during retreats.

Since physical space has not featured much in the adaptations of the Spiritual Exercises, I shall start by making the case for a shift of attention from persons to spaces in the way we discuss spiritual life. The insights from

³ See Nina Morris, 'Health, Well-Being and Open Space: Literature Review' (2003), available at http://www.openspace.eca.ac.uk/pdf/appendixf/OPENspacewebsite_APPENDIX_F_resource_31.pdf, accessed 12 May 2014.

this change of focus will help us to understand where, and why, Ignatius himself uses space in the Exercises. If space is such an important spiritual component for Ignatius we can argue that Africa's unique spiritual space should be taken into account, and then we can propose ways of adapting the Spiritual Exercises to this African space, and of using the adapted materials for spiritual direction.

From Persons to Spaces

When we remember a good experience of the Spiritual Exercises, the director and the spiritual progress we made dominate our narratives. Rarely do we remember the space that brought us and the director together. We forget that space is the abode of the holy. Such obliviousness to space may partly be a result of the 'turn to the subject', whereby theology tries to 'relate the content and history of faith to human subjectivity'.⁴ Some forms of spirituality have taken this 'turn' too far and have focused on the human to the exclusion of anything beyond or outside it.⁵ But, as Elizabeth A. Johnson writes,

Since theology is the study of God and all things in the light of God, shrinking attention to humanity apart from the rest of creation simply does not do justice to theology's intrinsic mission. Even more, ignoring the cosmos has a deleterious effect insofar as it paves the way for theology to retreat to otherworldliness, disparage matter, body, and the earth, and offer interpretations of reality far removed from the way things actually work. We must engage the world.⁶

While avoiding such extreme positions, we may still espouse some notion of a decentralised or 'hyphenated' subject.⁷ Suggesting a shift from persons to places, therefore, is not another round of criticism of the turn to the subject, but a conscious effort to emphasize a component of the subject that is often played down: the subject occupies space. It is

⁴ Francis Schüssler Fiorenza, 'Systematic Theology: Task and Methods', in *Systematic Theology: Roman Catholic Perspectives*, volume 1, edited by Francis Schüssler Fiorenza and John P. Galvin, 2nd edn (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2011), 26.

⁵ Sampooran Singh and Kanwaljit Kaur, *Symbiosis of Science and Spirituality: Generation of Innovation in Science for Human Survival* (Delhi: Kalpaz, 2006), 9.

⁶ Elizabeth A. Johnson, 'Turn to the Heavens and the Earth: Retrieval of the Cosmos in Theology', in *Vision and Values: Ethical Viewpoints in the Catholic Tradition*, edited by Judith A. Dwyer (Washington, DC: Georgetown UP, 2007), 57.

⁷ See Charles Taylor, *Sources of the Self: The Making of the Modern Identity* (Cambridge, Ma: Harvard UP, 1989), 3–11. The hyphenated subject is understood here in terms of the different roles an individual plays over a lifetime. In African culture changes or additions to these roles may be marked by initiations and rites of passage.

this space that decentralises the subject and hyphenates it with other subjects. Both the subject and the space it occupies must be taken seriously in spirituality. The road on which one walks is part of the journey. Philip Sheldrake has used the semiotic relationship between culture, place and space to open up possibilities for discussing space within theological reflections. 'Christianity', he says, 'turned its attention away from geography towards people as *loci* for the sacred'.⁸ But this shift has made it harder to see how the whole of creation is integrated in the sacramentality of God in the world. When Sheldrake talks about space as object of spirituality and theology, he wants to blur the line between who we are and where we are.

The road on which one walks is part of the journey.

In an African setting, and for the purpose of adapting the Exercises to such a setting, we must not forget the tension between space and spirituality. But equally we must not allow this tension to obstruct a pathway to God.

How Ignatius Uses Space in the Spiritual Exercises

The first time we encounter the importance of space in the *Spiritual Exercises* is in Annotation 20. There, Ignatius suggests that those who want to profit fully from the Exercises should separate themselves from family, friends and work, 'by moving out of one's place of residence and taking a different house or room where one can live in the greatest possible solitude'. Ignatius explains the benefits of this:

From this isolation three chief benefits, among many others, follow. The first is that a man, by separating himself from many friends and acquaintances, and likewise from many not well-ordered affairs, to serve and praise God our Lord, merits no little in the sight of His Divine Majesty. The second is, that being thus isolated, and not having his understanding divided on many things, but concentrating his care on one only, namely, on serving his Creator and benefiting his own soul, he uses with greater freedom his natural powers, in seeking with diligence what he so much desires. The third: the more our soul finds itself alone and isolated, the more apt it makes itself to approach and to reach its Creator and Lord, and the more it so approaches Him, the more it disposes itself to receive graces and gifts from His Divine and Sovereign Goodness. (Exx 20)

Commenting on this annotation, Mark Rotsaert argues that these separations are constitutive of the Spiritual Exercises: 'It is obvious that

⁸ Philip Sheldrake, *Space for the Sacred: Place, Memory, and Identity* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP, 2001), ix.

the long retreat of thirty days, in silence and individually done, is the matrix of all Ignatian Spiritual Exercises'.⁹ His reason is that we get to the core of the intention of the Spiritual Exercises—making a choice—through carefully working through the steps suggested by St Ignatius. Thus, seclusion in a new space is key to experiencing the full benefit of the Spiritual Exercises.

Starting from the observation that space plays a major role in the overall dynamic of the Exercises, we can understand better the reasons behind 'the composition of place' in a particular exercise. It seems that some meditations can only make sense when spatial elements are taken into account. An illustrative example will suffice.

In most of the preparatory work on prayer, Ignatius always includes a prelude on the composition of place. The composition is done by 'seeing the place' where the narrative for prayer happens. Ignatius foresees two categories of places, one corporeal and the other incorporeal.

I say the corporeal place, as for instance, a Temple or Mountain where Jesus Christ or Our Lady is found, according to what I want to contemplate. In an invisible contemplation or meditation—as here on the Sins—the composition will be to see with the sight of the imagination and consider that my soul is imprisoned in this corruptible body, and all the compound in this valley, as exiled among brute beasts. (Exx 47)

The prelude on the composition of place, therefore, becomes a determinant in assisting the retreatant to relive the events under consideration.

In the meditation on Two Standards, for instance, we find Ignatius deploying the composition of place for a full spiritual experience. In Exx 137–138, there is a graphic presentation of Christ and Satan standing on the plains of Jerusalem and Babylon respectively with their standards, each beckoning adherents to join him under his standard. Should one consider Africa as such a plain?

Africa as a Unique Spiritual Space

In his homily during the Eucharist at the opening of the Second Synod on Africa, Pope Benedict XVI described Africa as the spiritual lung of the world, albeit one that is ill, sickened by 'practical materialism, combined with relativist and nihilistic thought' and by 'religious fundamentalism,

⁹ Mark Rotsaert, 'When Are Spiritual Exercises Ignatian Spiritual Exercises?', *Review of Ignatian Spirituality* (CIS), 98 (2001), 39.

combined with political and economic interests'.¹⁰ The Pope was drawing attention to the one-sided way in which Africa's contributions to the world are often appreciated. For Pope Benedict, Africa offers to the world not only its natural resources but also a 'spiritual and cultural heritage, which humanity needs even more than raw materials'.

The continent of Africa is a unique spiritual space both because of the presence of traditional religions, with their cultural acceptance of a multiplicity of gods; and because the physical features of Africa offer Africans a particular experience of contemplating God in nature.

Traditional African Religions

The varied circumstances of life are reflected in many traditional African religions by the belief in multiple gods. Each people, each activity, and each natural event has a god that is responsible for it. For example, Ala is the goddess of the earth among the Igbo people (Nigeria), who is in charge of fertility and the underworld; Cagn is the creator god of the Bushmen (Central Africa and Democratic Republic of Congo), associated with the praying mantis; and Rock Sene is the god of the sky who controls the weather for the Serer (The Gambia).¹¹

Studies of traditional African religions abound. Benjamin Ray, for example, provides some fine insights into African religious thought, the kinds of problems that are approached from a religious perspective, and how traditional religion in Africa differs from Western version(s) of Christianity. Ray analyzes how symbols, rituals and community interact within the religious world-view of Africans. One of his conclusions is that African religious ingenuity is deployed situationally, in response to events in people's lives.¹² The functions and importance of the gods are closely linked with the existential concerns of human beings. A god is always a god of somebody or something. Gods do not exist in isolation.

But studies such as Ray's tend to stop short of the cooperative coexistence among the gods, and they fail to explore the subtleties of relationships between gods, and between gods and humans. In many

¹⁰ Benedict XVI, 'Homily of His Holiness during the Eucharistic Celebration for the Opening of the Second Special Assembly for Africa of the Synod of Bishops', Sunday, 4 October 2009, at http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/benedict_xvi/homilies/2009/documents/hf_ben-xvi_hom_20091004_sinodo-africa_en.html.

¹¹ All the examples come from <http://www.mythologydictionary.com/african-mythology.html>, accessed 1 June 2014.

¹² Benjamin Ray, *African Religions: Symbol, Ritual, and Community*, 2nd edition (Englewood Cliffs: Prentice Hall, 1999).

African ethnic groups, for instance, there may be other active supernatural beings, spirits and ancestors, but there is only one God.¹³ The existence of these beings does not preclude the acknowledgment and worship of a Supreme God.¹⁴ In such cultures, there is monotheism (not polytheism), but with a strong subsidiarity of functions.¹⁵

One of the unique aspects of Africa as a religious space is the attitude that enables Africans to conceptualise (and live) the belief in multiple gods as something inherently good. I believe that drawing attention to how Africans arrive at such a variety of conceptions of the human relationship with the divine will enable spiritual directors to situate African religious world-views better. Acknowledging, accepting, celebrating and deploying the richness of these religious world-views avoids evaluating them with the anthropological bias of the colonial-missionary era,¹⁶ or defining them from a Western philosophical perspective.¹⁷ The dynamism inherent in the way Africans relate to God is consequently better appreciated.¹⁸ As Laurenti Magesa writes:

African religious sentiments are that exclusivism amounts to reductionism of life and God. Life is larger than any one individual, community, or society can imagine and live it. The spiritual world, including God, has more surprises for humanity and the universe than any religious community can ever dream of.¹⁹

The African Landscape

Africa contains many of the geological marvels of the world. But how can the wonders of its landscape aid the spiritual growth of Africans? In December 2007, I visited Victoria Falls from the Zimbabwean side. While tourism was my initial motive for the trip, it quickly turned into a pilgrimage as I became lost in wondering contemplation. I began to understand the local name for the fall, *Mosi-aotunya*—the smoke that thunders. From

¹³ For further discussion, see *The Salesianum*, 26 (1931).

¹⁴ See Laurenti Magesa, *African Religion in the Dialogue Debate: From Intolerance to Coexistence* (Zurich: LIT, 2010).

¹⁵ See Edwin Anaebokwa Udoe, *Resolving the Prevailing Conflicts between Christianity and African (Igbo) Traditional Religion through Inculturation* (Berlin: LIT, 2011), 54–63. An analogy for this scenario might be a big company with a franchise arrangement. Brand identity and standards are maintained at the highest level, but franchises enjoy a good deal of independence.

¹⁶ Ray, *African Religions*, 11.

¹⁷ Laurenti Magesa, *African Religion: The Moral Traditions of Abundant Life* (Maryknoll: Orbis, 2002), 14–15.

¹⁸ *The Historical Studies of African Religion*, edited by O. T. Ranger and Isariah Kimambo (Berkeley: U. of California P, 1972).

¹⁹ Magesa, *African Religion in the Dialogue Debate*, 162.



the Victoria Falls to East African Rift Valley, the sources of Nile, Lake Victoria, the Sahara desert, the delta regions of Nigeria and the equatorial forest in Central Africa, people who live around Africa's geographical wonders derive spiritual benefit from them. Spiritual guides in Africa should explore how to use these resources as well.

Adaptation of the Spiritual Exercises to the African Continent

Africa is a unique spiritual space because there is a cultural disposition for multiple experiences of the divine, and because its geographical wonders make the encounter with the divine awe-filled. How can the dynamics of the Spiritual Exercises be adapted to this spiritual space and opened up to its people? In what parts of Spiritual Exercises would adaptation to geography be most fruitful?

It is important to note that Ignatius uses the word 'space' in terms of time, rather than geographical extension. He speaks of 'the space of a half-hour' (*spacio de media hora*) for the Particular Examen (Exx 19), 'the space of a Hail Mary' (*espacio de un Ave María*) when one is making a mental preparation for an upcoming prayer period (Exx 73) and 'the space of a quarter of an hour' (*espacio de un cuarto de hora*) for evaluating prayers (Exx 77). What may be equivalent to our use of 'space' is Ignatius' use of 'place'. He advises people to take 'a step or two before the place' (*un paso o dos antes del lugar*) of prayer to raise their minds and hearts to God (Exx 75). Ignatius also talks of 'seeing the place' (*viendo el lugar*) about



which we are going to pray, especially when contemplating Jesus' public ministry (Exx 91 and elsewhere).

It is through 'seeing the place' that we can connect the adaptation of the Spiritual Exercises to African geographical reality. For example, instead of insisting on the plains of Jerusalem in the Kingdom Meditations we might imagine the plains of the Rift Valley of Kenya as a powerful geographical analogy. The various fishing spots around Lake Victoria make up a good visionary space for the activities in which Jesus took part around water. More importantly, evoking the geographical wonders of Africa helps us to conceptualise the immensity of creation that is found in the narrative of the Principle and Foundation.

Let us not take these suggestions as merely cosmetic attempts to replace biblical narratives with African equivalents. Such equivocation was necessary when African thought systems needed to be pegged to the dominant cultural narratives of the West, but it is now no longer warranted. At best, it served as a distraction and a distortion of both African and biblical worlds.

By contrast, my suggestions here serve two important functions. First, they will provide an affirmation that God is *actually* at work in African geographical space: we do not need to go to Jerusalem to worship God (John 4:21). Tying the experience of God to the situatedness of the retreatant is essential in linking the spiritual voyage to *real* experiences. Second, since the retreatant already experiences the spiritual nature of geographical space, this provides a springboard for a closer, greater and more mysterious look at the human quest for the living God. The spiritual director must search, discriminate and use appropriate space to guide retreatants in a closer walk with God.

Best Practices of Giving the Spiritual Exercises in Africa

Instead of issuing directives on how to adapt prayer materials in the Spiritual Exercises to the African space, let us illustrate how one meditation could be adapted. The choice of the part of the Spiritual Exercises is arbitrary and the geographical context is limited to my own experiences. Let us use the meditation on Two Standards and the Rift Valley of Kenya.

In the text of the meditation the retreatant is invited in the Preludes, first, to enter into the narrative and envision Jesus and Satan calling people to their standards and, second, to compose the place: the great plains of Jerusalem and Babylon where Jesus and Satan stand as they seek for followers. Exx 140–142 discusses Lucifer's camp: Lucifer makes snares to lure people into desiring riches, which will lead to the desire for worldly honours. These honours will eventually result in pride and its damning consequences. Exx 143–146 is about how Jesus operates: he sends out his apostles to all the earth to spread his doctrines, which are to aid everybody in accepting spiritual (and material, if needed) poverty, to welcome contempt and thus become humble.

In recent African history, we have an example of a great plain on which the forces of good and evil have contended. It is the plain of the Rift Valley in Kenya where, in 2008, political violence surrounding the presidential elections was used to manipulate the problem of land rights which has existed since independence.²⁰ It is easy to see Lucifer and his agents ensnaring the people of Kenya into violence, tempting them to put their own self-interest before the suffering of those being killed or whose homes are being burned, and refusing all forms of negotiation because of pride.²¹ We can also see how Christ, the King of Peace, continues to urge people to reason, to reconciliation, to Christian hospitality and to humility.

Were I guiding someone from Kenya through the Meditation on Two Standards, I would start off by encouraging that person to enter into the narrative of Kenyan society, and how the question of land (re)distribution is foundational for the existence of the country. Then, I would present

²⁰ See Jacqueline M. Klopp, 'The Real Reason for Kenya's Violence: Contrary to Popular Belief, It Isn't Simply "Tribal" or "Spontaneous"', *The Christian Science Monitor* (14 January 2008), available at <http://www.csmonitor.com/Commentary/Opinion/2008/0114/p09s02-coop.html>, accessed 21 May 2014; Karuti Kanyinga, 'The Legacy of the White Highlands: Land Rights, Ethnicity and the Post-2007 Election Violence in Kenya', *Journal of Contemporary African Studies*, 27/3, 'Kenya's Uncertain Democracy: The Electoral Crisis of 2008' (2009), 325–344. The prophetic voice of the playwright Ngugi wa Thiong'o, in *I Will Marry when I Want* (Johannesburg: Heinemann, 1982), had forewarned Kenya about this tragic situation.

²¹ See <http://www.irinnews.org/In-depth/76116/68/Kenya-s-post-election-crisis> (accessed 12 June 2012).

how the great plains of the Rift Valley are *the* theatre for outbursts of conflict, and also the laboratory for solutions to the problem. In this context, the retreatant would be guided into deeper meditation on how the land question is *essentially* a battle between the forces of evil and good, in which Lucifer and Christ are under their standards, beckoning people to join them. If the retreatant receives the grace requested in this Meditation—‘to ask for insight into the deceits of the evil leader, and for help to guard myself against them; and further, for insight into the genuine life which the supreme and truthful commander sets forth, and grace to imitate him’ (Exx 139)—it will shift attention from seeing the periodic violence in Kenya as a tribal conflict to seeing it as a fight against evil forces.

Those familiar with the Kenyan situation will easily see the import of this adaptation for the retreatant who is choosing the Standard of Christ in the Election. The plains around Jerusalem were great theatres of war during the Crusades, and ‘crusade spirituality’ was arguably still present and alive to Ignatius.²² Babylon was the image of Satan (Isaiah 14:4), so Ignatius could use it graphically to illustrate some sort of physical location for the meditation. The plains of the Rift Valley today are the stage where the ills of Kenyan society are played out. For a Christian from Kenya to meditate on his or her discipleship of Christ using the core realities of existence in Kenya is more meaningful than to think about the place and time of the Crusades, and a great way to enter into the dynamics of the Spiritual Exercises.

In conclusion, rather than restating what I have tried to explore, I shall indicate some openings from what was left out. First, my subtitle here is ‘*an example from Africa*’. This means that I have simply taken one of myriads of possible adaptations. Spiritual guides, therefore, are invited to think of other examples that could be used. Second, my choice of the African ‘space’ is to cast the net as wide as possible, so that subsets such as ‘women in Africa’, ‘men in Africa’, ‘politicians in Africa’, ‘addicts in Africa’ or ‘religious in Africa’ may be carefully taken into account while giving spiritual direction. The geographical consideration not only provides us with hard facts about imagery and symbols that could be brought to bear for various meditations, but it also indicates a unique embodiment of the retreatant. Finally, if we are to make the Spiritual Exercises part of a

²² See Hans Wolter, ‘Elements of Crusade Spirituality in St Ignatius’, in *Ignatius of Loyola: His Personality and Spiritual Heritage, 1556–1956*, edited by Friedrich Wulf (St Louis: Institute of Jesuit Sources, 1977), 97–134.

popular spiritual path for African Christians, we need to think of geographical adaptation as an important tool. The popularisation of the Spiritual Exercises is a noble enterprise. One way of achieving it is to see how the recipients *embody* their faith.

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