

INSTITUTIONAL DISCERNMENT OF SPIRITS

By NEIL P. HURLEY

IN HIS sermon on the Mount, our Lord said: 'No man can serve two masters; for either he will hate the one and love the other, or else he will stand by the one and despise the other. You cannot serve God and mammon'.¹ The simplicity of this criterion has become understandably blurred in complex 'urban-technological' societies, where most people play specialized roles within large bureaucratic structures — governmental, corporate, military, academic and ecclesiastical. If religion as a cultural expression of spiritual experience has a tendency to accommodate to the hidden dynamics of the societies in which it is embodied, then a serious danger arises regarding the interpretation of the gospel as the living word of God — 'keener than any two-edged sword' and 'a discerner of the thoughts and intentions of the heart'.²

The problem in America's consumer society is a privatization of faith which leads to what Robert Bellah has called 'civic religion', a pluralistic levelling down of biblical faith, so that it fails to place institutions under critical judgment.³ When one looks at the quality of life in our media, our politics, our decision-making hierarchies, it is hard to believe that they are composed of persons committed to biblical faith. Those within the triple 'melting pot' of our judeo-christian heritage direct their conscious energies towards political and civic issues, but rarely to the unintended consequences of the bureaucracies and institutions which they serve day in and day out. The formula *idem cives et christianus* has protected freedom of conscience; but it has inhibited any communal effort by jews, catholics and protestants to channel their common biblical faith towards any true discernment of the goals they unwittingly serve by exempting from biblical critique the organizations in which they live, move and have their being.

What is institutional discernment?

To illustrate what we mean by institutional discernment, let us take an historical case from the Society of Jesus: how the personal experiences of its founder, Ignatius Loyola, became deepened in his

¹ Mt 6, 24.

² Heb 4, 12.

³ Bellah, Robert: *Beyond Belief* (New York, 1972).

post-conversion period, until it led to the book of the Spiritual Exercises as a guide to individual discernment for identifying the will of God, and to the Constitutions of the jesuits regarding corporate decisions designed to realize 'the greater glory of God'. In St Ignatius's autobiography, we have the seeds of the discernment process. While recuperating from his leg wound, he fantasized, with different emotional results. When he thought of heroically performing chivalrous deeds for a noble lady, he was left with dryness and lassitude; but, after imagining that he had gone to Jerusalem barefoot and amid austerity, he experienced deep joy and a lasting peace. This account is a concise masterpiece of the phenomenology of interiority. Whereas animals can feel changes in their moods, only we humans can reflect on this and extract meaning out of it.

Only against the backdrop of a transcendent awareness (that is, 'I know and can question desolation and consolation') is discernment possible. The first companions of Ignatius recognized this, and came together frequently for prayer, discussion and discernment. In fact, mental prayer within the ignatian context is unintelligible without seeing the 'beginning, middle and end' of every process.⁴ This technique was at the heart of the ignatian mystique of service, the priority given to detachment and to the cherished ambition of being a consummate 'contemplative in action, rather than to long prayers and physical penance'. The best exponent of the Exercises, by Ignatius's own testimony, was Blessed Peter Faber, whose *Memorial* is a classic exposé on how individual discernment works in a soul of rare sensitivity.⁵ Difficult enough in an individual life, discernment becomes even more challenging in groups. St Ignatius complained of how few skilled retreat directors there were. He had to warn St Francis Borgia, later the third jesuit general, against what Joseph de Guibert, the historical expert on jesuit spirituality, termed a 'mystique of introversion'.⁶ Early jesuits had a longing for the eremitical life (e.g. Claude le Jay, Alphonsus Rodriguez, André Oviedo).⁷ In order to underscore the importance of collective discernment, Ignatius apologized for the Constitutions in his preamble, stressing that the interior law written by the Spirit had to be paramount.

The notion of collective discernment explains why the Society of Jesus, by contrast to older monastic and mendicant orders, had an

⁴ Exx 333.

⁵ B. Pierre Favre: *Mémoriale*, ed. M. de Certeau (Paris, 1956).

⁶ De Guibert, Joseph: *The Jesuits: their Spiritual Doctrine and Practice* (Chicago, 1964), pp 86-7.

⁷ *Ibid.*

authoritarian structure. The dominicans, benedictines and franciscans had ballot elections, regular chapter meetings, and limited terms for their highest superiors. The jesuits had a general elected for life by special delegates to infrequent general congregations made up of the top-echelon jesuits with a special vow of obedience to the pope. In practice, this caste-like political structure was not oppressive for one reason. The discernment process was built in by means of the 'manifestation of conscience', one of the *substantialia primi ordinis*, a prime requirement of the Society's internal unity and apostolic effectiveness. Jesuits were required by the spirit and letter of their rule to disclose their conscience and open their inner life to superiors, thus making possible an institutional discernment. Francis Xavier, in his last letter from Sancian, discusses the advantages of a mission to China, and makes explicit reference to the opposition which he feels from the devil.⁸ As the Society of Jesus grew, this type of transparency demanded by the 'manifestation of conscience' (as an extension of the discernment principle of the Exercises) would progressively atrophy. It must be remembered that the order grew very swiftly: from 60 in 1540 to 1,000 at the time of Ignatius's death in 1556, to some 11,000 in 1610, when Fr Claudius Aquaviva was the general.

The eclipse of jesuit institutional discernment

After Aquaviva, the jesuit generalate was no longer the intelligence centre which Ignatius had made of it with his profuse correspondence. While the Constitutions cautioned against national and political partisanship, jesuits were expected to apply spiritual strategy to all areas of life. Did not St Ignatius admit to the vows of jesuit scholastic the widowed regent, Princess Juana, the daughter of King Charles V and Isabella, thus giving the order its only female jesuit to date? And was not the reason to keep her unwed — her own wish, incidentally — so as not to jeopardize the political stability of the Hispano-Habsburg dynasty?⁹ However, there was only a hair-line separating ignatian discernment, which hallowed the means, and that jesuitism which became a synonym for the machiavellian principle of the end justifying the means. From the seventeenth century on, the jesuits are seen as political and not spiritual strategists.

One of the reasons for the suppression of the jesuits in 1773 was the support they gave to monarchs in a time when Enlightenment principles were eroding the basis of the 'divine right of kings'. Père la

⁸ Letter to Francisco Perez and Gaspar Barzeo, in *Caritas y Escritos de San Francisco Javier*, ed. Felix Zubillaga (Madrid, 1953), pp 545-6.

⁹ *Ignatius Loyola: Letters to Women*, ed. Hugo Rahner (London, 1960), pp 33, 55, 9, 67.

Chaise had the Edict of Nantes revoked through his influence with Louis XIV; and, following the death of that confessor, his successor, Père le Tellier, had Port Royal suppressed. In Poland, the jesuits, through their colleges, waged a religious war with the protestants. It was on the missions, however, that jesuits retained their instinct for institutional discernment by sympathizing with the native peoples, generally against the powerful colonial and establishment interests of Europe. Some of the most glorious chapters in missionary history must include the work of the french jesuits among the north american indians, the spanish jesuits in Paraguay, and the spanish, italian, dutch and other jesuits in Japan and China.¹⁰ As the jesuits gained in prestige, power and wealth, they made enemies — from other catholic orders, the jansenists, the encyclopedists, the gallicans opposed to roman control (ultramontanism), the bishops resentful of jesuit privileges, the secular clergy envious of the jesuit mobility, and rulers like Louis XV and Pombal in Portugal, who wanted to imitate the commercial prosperity and nationalistic policies of protestant England and Germany. The suppression of the chinese rites paved the way for the papal bull which suppressed the Society of Jesus in 1773.¹¹

The restored society was given its organizational impetus by John Roothaan, a resolute general who edited a commentary on the Spiritual Exercises.¹² His retreat notes indicate a return to the mystique of introversion which characterized Francis Borgia: *Severitas in oculorum custodia; custodia linguae — ne quid in mei commendationem etiam indirecte — ne quid criticantis in modum de aliis. Odium mei — carnis et spiritus, i.e. superbiae. In recreatione multa reformanda! Severa temperantia — abstinencia a superfluis tractandis. Severa repressio phantasmarum.*¹³ In 1834, his diary includes the following note: *Qualia et quanta beneficia. Talem ac tantulum — vocatum — perductum, gubernatum — per tot vias actales. Denique*

¹⁰ Cf Healy, George R.: 'The French Jesuits and the idea of the Noble Savage', in *The William and Mary Quarterly* XV, no. 2 (April, 1958), pp 143-67; de Charlevoix, Pierre: *Histoire du Paraguay* (Paris, 1756); Boxer, C.R.: *The Christian Century in Japan* (University of California Press, 1951); Rowbotham, Arnold H.: *Missionary and Mandarin: the Jesuits at the Court of China* (University of California Press, 1958).

¹¹ Cf von Pastor, Ludwig F.: *History of the Popes*, vol 34 (London, 1941), pp 80 ff.

¹² Cf de Vauz, G. and Riondel, H.: *Le Père Jean Roothaan* (Paris, 1935).

¹³ 'Rigour in custody of the eyes; control of the tongue — never a word in self-praise, not even indirectly, nor in criticism of others'. 'Self-hatred — of the flesh and the spirit, i.e. pride. Great reformation needed with regard to recreation. Austerity and temperance — abstain from all superfluities. Repress the imagination with all severity'.

Wilhelm, Balthasar: 'Der ehrwürdige, Diener Gottes A.R.P. Johannus Roothaan S.J. in den heiligen Exerzitien', in *Zeitschrift für Ascese und Mystik*, 13 (1938), pp 148-51.

*huc! ut omnino sanctus fierem.*¹⁴ The question of obedience gradually became an administrative virtue and not the product of corporate discernment. The Meschler school of spirituality stressed in order of importance what was necessary, what was useful, what was pleasing. Throughout the long generalate of Fr Vlodimir Ledochowski, (1915-1942), the Spiritual Exercises inclined more towards the imitation of Christ, and a contemplation of the mysteries of his life, rather than towards the orchestration of the moods of the retreatant to arrive at the concrete imperative which God wanted to mediate to the soul through the motions of the spirit.¹⁵

Political prophets and institutional discernment

The eclipse of the discernment technique in religious decision-making should not close our eyes to the spiritual roots of those who in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries protested against the institutional injustices they saw about them. Not long after the restoration of the Society of Jesus, Henry David Thoreau wrote his tract on civil disobedience, suggesting that the issue of law and order cannot presume unconditional loyalty. Thoreau, building on Ralph Waldo Emerson's philosophy of self-reliance, fashioned a secular philosophy of institutional discernment. Later, Karl Marx would blend moral indignation with sustained philosophical reflection to question the purposes and practices of bourgeois capitalism. Joseph Schumpeter, the noted economist and defender of capitalism, has credited Marx with being a prophet. There is striking resemblance between Amos, the first of the Old Testament prophets, and Marx. Both are prophets of righteousness, seeing about them the exploitation of the poor by the privileged class who define reality and shape the laws to suit their self-serving definitions. For Amos and the later prophets, the Lord is a friend of the humble and the oppressed, a God of the earlier nomadic brotherhood, where the strong felt responsibility for the weak. Marx's writings have a clear affinity with this tradition.

Curiously, Abraham Lincoln is seldom recognized as a master of institutional discernment, largely because for centuries politics had become gradually separated from ethics, not to speak of the gospel's teachings on social justice. Essential to ignatian discernment is the

¹⁴ 'What blessings, great blessings. So much and so little — called, led, guided — along so many different paths. And then finally! — to become perfectly holy'.

¹⁵ The crucial role of the manifestation of conscience (in spite of the exemption won by the same General from the prohibition of the Code of Canon Law) declined during this period. In my twenty-five years as a jesuit, it was a 'dead letter' in practice. Many jesuits with whom I have lived on three continents concur, though the practice is being revived in many provinces and among younger jesuits.

awareness of how wealth distorts one's purpose. In fact, Ignatius in his Constitutions stipulated that Jesuit poverty should never be modified, except to make it stricter. Some insight into the spiritual chemistry of wealth is gained from Lincoln's comments on slavery as an institution. In his New Haven speech on 6 March 1860, Lincoln pointed out that property is the basis of public opinion, and that slaves as property represented a giant vested interest: 'whether the owners of this species of property do really see it as it is, it is not for me to say; but if they do, they do not see it as we see it — but through a thick coating of two billions of dollars'.¹⁶

Lincoln was preoccupied with the will of God, another Ignatian trait. In his reply to a Committee from Religious Denominations of Chicago, he said: '... it is my earnest desire to know the will of Providence in this matter. And if I can learn what it is, I will do it'.¹⁷ The issue, of course, was slavery. Earlier he had remarked: 'I know there is a God, and that he hates injustice and slavery. I see the storm coming, and I know his hand is in it. If he has a place and work for me, and I think he has, I believe I am ready. I am nothing, but truth is everything. I know I am right, for Christ teaches it, and Christ is God'.¹⁸ Someone observed that whereas Edmund Burke drenched political thought with wisdom, Lincoln saturated it with charity.

To continue with the tradition of institutional discernment of spirits, it is necessary to treat Mahatma Gandhi, who borrowed from the teachings of Thoreau and Tolstoi to fashion his theory of non-violent response to institutional injustice — *satyagraha* (civil disobedience) and *swadeshi* (non-vengeful boycotts).¹⁹ Two of the major spiritual influences in Gandhi's life were the Bhagavad Gita and the Sermon on the Mount. He was a true contemplative in action, and wrote an amazing book called *The Gospel of Selfless Action*, a paraphrase of what St Ignatius called the Society of Jesus — *societas minima*, that is of the self-effacing companions of Christ dedicated to a mystique of service. The external focus of apostolic activity derives from the inner, as Gandhi appreciated: 'The human body is the battle-field where the eternal duel between right and wrong goes on. Therefore it is capable of being turned into the gateway of freedom'.²⁰ This conviction of Gandhi was contagious. In the famous Salt March (March 1930) in protest against aspects of British policy, numerous Indian *satyagrahis* offered themselves for punishment.²¹ Some thirty years later, Martin Luther King,

¹⁶ *A Concise Lincoln Dictionary: Thoughts and Statements*, ed. Ralph B. Winn (New York, 1959), p. 102.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 103.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 109.

¹⁹ Cf. Sheean, Vincent: *Lead, kindly Light* (New York, 1949), pp. 41-45.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, pp. 50-51.

²¹ *Ibid.*, p. 146.

inspired by Gandhi's precepts, staged his famous freedom march on Selma, Alabama, and enriched the literature of institutional discernment with his letters from the Birmingham jail.

The dangerous rise of civic religion

One of the major perils which follows from the decline of a sense of institutional discernment is civic religion. This is the uncritical acceptance of a concrete cultural expression of faith which denies the element of transcendence. Christ, as we know, preached a 'theology of reversal': the first would be last, and the harlots and publicans would enter the kingdom of God before the clerical officials (the scribes and the pharisees).²² In the United States, civic religion has been performing the function of reassuring people about their private lives without relating their activities to the larger secular world. This exemption of the spheres of the social, economic and political creates what Bishop Helder da Camera has termed 'institutional violence', precipitating as an understandable, if inexcusable, response the more direct forms of violent protest. The writings of Robert Bellah on civic religion have been implemented by recent studies of the practice of this pseudo-religion in the White House sermons and the 'Nixon theology'.²³

As a corrective to the privatization of faith in civic religion, which disguises the fact that one is serving both God and mammon, there has grown up an awareness that christianity is social by essence and must touch all men both in their temporal and spiritual zones of existence. New theological currents have grown up to offset the dualism of civic religion and to prepare the way for a revival of institutional discernment: the theology of politics, of protest, of revolution and of liberation. Secularization, as Harvey Cox has pointed out, has been 'the liberation of man from religious and metaphysical tutelage, the turning of his attention away from other worlds and toward this one'.²⁴ The idea of the anonymous christian arose, thus explaining why we can link up such historical personages as Thoreau, Lincoln, Marx and Gandhi with the christian tradition of institutional discernment.²⁵ The Spirit breathes where it wills. We must learn to look for its fruits everywhere, not only where we expect to find them.

²² For an excellent treatment of Christ's 'theology of reversal', cf Batey, Richard: *Jesus and the Poor* (New York, 1972); also Hurley, N.: 'Jesus' Parables and Strategic Fiction', in *Review for Religious*, vol 31 (1972-73), pp 758 ff.

²³ Cf Bellah, *op. cit.*: *The White House Sermons* (New York, 1972); Henderson, Charles P.: *The Nixon Theology* (New York, 1972).

²⁴ *The Secular City* (New York, 1965), p 17.

²⁵ Cf Röper, Anita: *The Anonymous Christian* (New York, 1973).

Liberation theology: risks and promise

Liberation theology adopts a critical stance toward society. In latin America it grew out of the dependency relationship which exists between underdeveloped nations and those more economically advanced;²⁶ in north America it has evolved out of the black consciousness *vis-à-vis* the white man's dominance.²⁷ Liberation theology insists upon historical relevance, and draws upon the behavioural sciences to arrive at its concrete diagnoses, so as to make faith-judgments on structures and institutions.²⁸ Admittedly, it has been indebted to marxian tools of analysis, but that is largely because of the absence of such tools among christian social thinkers.²⁹ The rich promise of liberation theology is to return christian thinking to a 'this-worldly' focus in terms not only of judgment but also of action. Why must christians learn about the formation of a 'new man' from political revolutionaries such as Ernesto Che Guevara, who said: 'We revolutionaries often lack the knowledge and the intellectual audacity to face the task of the development of a new human being by methods different from the conventional ones, and the conventional methods suffer from the influence of the society that created them'.³⁰

When Fidel Castro was in Chile in October 1972, he met with priests committed to socialism. When asked when he lost his faith, Castro thought a while and replied that he never really had it. He studied with the jesuits in Havana and admired their piety, their intellectual training and their educational skills. However, what they taught him, he claimed, was 'outside of history'. Since that time, he had found some creed which was action-oriented and involved with the historical process. Shortly before Castro's visit, Graham Greene, the noted british novelist, spoke to a group of christians of the left. Declaring himself a man of the christian left, Greene said that he had been going around the world, looking for socialism with a human face. We mention Guevara, Castro and Greene because they are obviously involved in institutional discernment. This is threatening to secular and ecclesiastical establishments because 'false consciousness' has penetrated so deeply into much of western thinking that fear of any deviation from

²⁶ Cf Gutierrez, Gustavo: *Liberation Theology* (Maryknoll, New York, 1973).

²⁷ Cf Cone, James: *Black Theology and Black Power* (New York, 1969).

²⁸ Two important works on christian utopian thinking as historical possibility are: Tillich, Paul: *Political Expectations* (New York, 1972), and Alves, Rubem: *Tomorrow's Child* (New York, 1972).

²⁹ Cf Petulla, Joseph: *Christian Political Theology: A Marxian Guide* (Maryknoll, New York, 1972).

³⁰ *The speeches and writing of Ernesto Che Guevara*, ed. John Gerassi (New York, 1968), p 396.

recognizable policies and structures militates against this type of discernment. The best example, perhaps, is the Chilean Christian who admitted that while he was afraid of his children being indoctrinated by Marxist textbooks, he had never objected to the subtle, all-pervasive indoctrination of a consumer ethos and a competitive mentality which market societies disseminate, and which uncritical church people indirectly sanction by their failure to exercise institutional discernment.³¹

The contribution of liberation theology is both timely and difficult to exaggerate.³² However, it is accompanied with a great risk. It sets up a 'we' and 'they' relationship, and, in so doing, forgets that power can corrupt both the 'we' and the 'they'. Power in the first person is always perceived differently than in the third person. As Fr Juan Luis Segundo has cautioned, 'the synoptics show Jesus struggling, not against this or that sin, but against a sort of super-sin, a bad faith, a hardness of faith that is not merely individual but adheres to the very structures of the people of Israel'.³³ The mental structure comes out of a social matrix. It is a psychological law that we become what we hate, what we struggle against. To identify unjust structures, to combat them, is necessary, but not enough. What starts as an evil outside the crusader can quickly lodge itself in the heart and mind of that same crusader, a phenomenon which Herman Melville analyzed brilliantly in *Moby Dick*: the obsessiveness of Captain Ahab in trying to kill the white whale. The fact that someone else is wrong does not make us right. This perhaps is the difference between Martin Luther and Ignatius of Loyola, between Lincoln and the abolitionists who still wanted to keep wage-slaves in their New England factories, between Gandhi and T. E. Lawrence of Arabia (reluctantly drawn into bloodshed), between Martin Luther King and Malcolm X. The battle is both within and without: what is required is a sense of irony that we are a battle ground for right and wrong, as Gandhi put it, or as St Ignatius said in the Exercises: 'There are three thoughts in me — that which is properly mine, that which comes from the good spirit and that which comes from the evil spirit'.³⁴

³¹ A startling religious symptom of unawareness of imminent threat to human freedom is the lack of critical comment on B. F. Skinner's *Beyond Freedom and Dignity* (Boston, 1971).

³² Pablo Freire has illustrated the dangers of any policy which aids the social, economic and political development of marginal peoples without making them critical and capable of taking their destiny into their own hands. Cf his *Pedagogy for the Oppressed* (New York, 1970).

³³ 'Education, Communication, Liberation: A Christian View', in *IDOC Documents* (November 12, 1971), p 82.

³⁴ Exx 32.

Towards a rediscovery of institutional discernment

There is a certain polarization evident today in the world. On the one hand, in conservative religious circles there is a stress on private piety: an almost exclusive concern with liturgy, private retreats and sacristy-type devotions. On the other hand, there is a radical approach to religion: one which pleads for political and social commitment; to the neglect of the sacramental life and a faith in the Church as an objective reality which, despite human frailty, is a channel of the Spirit and constant renewal. Between civic religion and a liberation theology a bridge is needed: the technique of institutional discernment. We have tried to show how this worked in the founding of the Society of Jesus; how in the history of the jesuits, it was more in evidence on the missions than in the more comfortable apostolates of serving as confessors to royalty and conducting schools built by the benefactions of the aristocracy and wealthy patrons. We also tried to suggest the revival of institutional discernment in the lives of charismatic political leaders, and the reaction to individualized piety (*idem cives et christianus*) in democratic societies based on biblical values. A gospel 'theology of reversal' points to the 'third world' as the area where institutional discernment is being renewed; but it also indicates that this spiritual resource must be rediscovered in more affluent cultures, where the temptation to civic religion and 'dualistic theology' is the strongest. There is much talk about discernment and directed retreats. That is all to the good. However, there must be an attempt to introduce an historical relevance and a social criticism into any true effort to recover the tradition of discernment of spirits as a technique for identifying the will of God.³⁵ Otherwise the danger is that we can become servants of power, fragmenting the collective force of countless adherents to biblical faith, who, in their sensitivity to one another's conscience, allow unjust structures and institutions to flourish. *Agere contra* was the great ignatian 'fail-safe' mechanism: our strengths are generally our weaknesses. Private discernment is a precious achievement. Similarly, liberation theology is a welcome contribution to religious reflection. Both should come closer together, if we wish to avoid serving the 'super-sin' which Christ opposed and which, by his allowance, caused his death. 'You cannot serve God and mammon!' But it is possible, as history has shown repeatedly, to believe that one is serving God when in truth one is strengthening the cause of mammon.

³⁵ An example of the omission of historical and institutional considerations in the study of discernment is the otherwise valuable treatment of Piet Penning de Vries: *Discernment of Spirits according to the Life and Teaching of St Ignatius Loyola* (New York, 1973).