FINDING OUR IDENTITY

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CONFIDENCE TRICKSTERS IDENTIFY their victims easily. They identify with the larceny in the blood which they recognize there. Their victims, however, commonly have little skill in identifying predators. For the same preoccupation with easy money which the confidence trickster recognizes in them prevents them from identifying others for what they are. The difference between the confidence trickster and the victim is often a strong sense of identity. The con-man knows who he is, what he wants, and can identify with qualities which others do not even recognize in themselves. The sense of identity of their victims is weaker, and prevents them from identifying with others.

In this article I would like to explore the relationship between Christian identity and our capacity to identify with others. After some introductory remarks, I shall devote the major part of the article to the patterns of identification characteristic of Ignatius's Spiritual Exercises, and conclude with some remarks of a more general kind.

Identification

The importance of identification with others is generally recognized by all Christian spiritual schools. We are urged to contemplate the life of Christ, to consider the way in which God acts in the world, to read the lives of saints. When he lay on his sick bed, Ignatius himself provided an example of the importance of identification. He read the lives of the saints, and considered how he could outdo their feats. As he began his long search to find his real and new identity, he began naturally to identify with people whom he admired.

To identify with people and the world presupposes that we can explore the world and lives of other people. This capacity to enter the experience of others is often referred to as the imagination. But when spiritual writers insist on the place of the imagination in prayer, they often meet resistance. For some readers identify it with the ability to visualize the detail of the stories of the gospel with a clarity that demands the eye of a painter or of a town

planner. This endowment, the pictorial imagination, is given richly to some people and thinly to others. Sometimes it helps us to identify with others, but it can also be a hindrance.

The kind of imagination required for identifying with others, however, is more fundamental. It is the capacity to enter the world as it exists outside ourselves, and particularly to enter the predicament and inner life of other people. While it too is often to some extent a gift, a facility in entering empathetically the world outside ourselves is a condition of any life that is truly human. To the extent that we lack it, we shall be confined within our own perspective and constrained to seek our own interests. So we correctly count it an affliction to be unable either to glimpse what people close to us are feeling, or to respond sympathetically to their sufferings and blessings.

This empathetic use of the imagination is essential within any spirituality that emphasizes identification with others. In the Spiritual Exercises, Ignatius encourages also the use of the pictorial imagination to make vivid the stories of the gospel. But this is of secondary importance. Even when he commends contemplation of gospel scenes, he is concerned to draw on the more fundamental capacity to enter and respond to the world. Some of his compositions, indeed, defy the pictorial imagination. When he describes the human soul, for example, as imprisoned within the corruptible body, and the whole human person exiled among brute beasts, his description gains its imaginative power from its symbolic force. That power will be lost in a crudely pictorial representation. The image invites us to see the world in a new way, but with the eye of the heart rather than of the mind.

There are, however, two competing forms of identification, both of which have won support among spiritual writers. In the first, we go out from our familiar, inner world to identify with people and the world outside ourselves. This is to leave our own desires and representations of the world, to explore and be challenged by a world not shaped by our own mind and interests. This kind of identification can lead us to conceive our identity in deeper terms than we did before.

The second form of identification emphasizes introspection. We identify within ourselves qualities of our world, and as we come into touch with them, we are able to reconcile aspects of our own fragmented identity. So we discover the feminine or the child or an image of the world within our psyche. This process is a

counterfeit of identification, to the extent that we reduce the dimensions and reality of the world outside ourselves to the more graspable shape that it bears in the image we make of it. We minimize the ways in which God and the external world are radically other than ourselves and inalienably themselves, reshaping them so that we can be comfortable with them. The external world, then, is reshaped within our imagination in reassuring ways. According to this view, the function of spirituality is to preserve the harmony between ourselves and the external world, by ensuring that the external world is reshaped to a comforting image of it, and that our image is preserved from challenge.

Of these two kinds of identification which I described, Ignatius is always concerned to go out to the world and others, and is careful to have us test our own images of the world and our imaginative grasp of it against its reality. The characteristic vice of introspection is sentimentality, which leads us to defend ourselves against the reality of the world outside ourselves, by nurturing the images which we have made of it, whether to terrify or to comfort ourselves. In the Spiritual Exercises Ignatius constantly leads us to confront this kind of sentimentality.

Identification in the Spiritual Exercises

In the first exercise of the first week, Ignatius describes the world of the fallen angels, of our first parents, and of someone who went to hell after committing one mortal sin. He gives us just sufficient background to delineate the choice and fate of the protagonists in the stories, and then urges us to set their fate against our own. The second exercise returns to the same themes. There we are encouraged to focus on our personal sins. We enter upon a narrow study of the external circumstances of our lives: the places where we have lived, our dealings with others, and the offices we have held. The focus of the exercise then broadens to embrace the larger universe in which our lives are lived. We see ourselves within the world of human beings, of angels, of creation, and finally of creation as it stands before God. In both exercises we are to compare our own continued life with the eternal death of other sinners, and the disorder of our lives with the order of creation. The comparison leads to shame which is expressed in a colloquy to the crucified Christ, whose suffering is the cost of my deliverance.

These meditations are significant first of all in that they invite us to enter the world outside ourselves. Their imaginative character

is restrained, and the world is described in objective and unadorned terms. Even when we attend to our sins, we are asked to record the objective circumstances of our lives, and not to explore our guilt and motivation. The treatment is sober.

The setting of the world of the angels and of our first parents is also objective, but the objectivity is that of faith. Ignatius presents the stories as part of the history of the world. So they form the broader context of our lives. We enter them not to create a world of fancy, but to recognize the given shape of the world in which we live.

Secondly, Ignatius has us enter a world in which the harsh law of consequences reigns. Whether we like it or not, this is a world in which one mortal sin can condemn the sinner to hell, and where by their fall the angels are excluded from the sight of God. These consequences follow, and cannot be evaded by forgetfulness or by reshaping the dimensions of the world in a more reassuring way. The cross is the emblem of this law of consequence.

Thirdly, however, the world with which Ignatius has us identify is also a world of grace. The point of the exercise is to see how I, like all other human beings, live in this objective world of consequences but, unlike many others, I have been delivered from the damnation that follows sin. In my case the implacable character of the world has been breached. So the cross is the emblem also of grace.

We do not identify with the world of consequences in the same way as we do with the world of grace. We enter the world of sin and punishment as an observer; with the world of grace we identify affectively. The Exercises do not encourage us to dwell on the details of our sins and on our own worthlessness. We reflect on our sins only in order to recognize the true dimensions of our world and so to place ourselves correctly in it. Our hearts are involved only when we realize that for us the consequences of sin have been suspended. Hence, the prayer leads us not to guilt at our sins, but to shame before a world which has not been allowed such space as we have enjoyed. By identifying with those who have suffered for deeds of less evil than mine, and by recognizing my place in the world which led Christ to the cross, I come to appreciate my own part in the world both of sin and of grace.

So the exercises of the first week invite us into a world which is objective in the twin sense that it is outside ourselves and is ruled by the law of consequence. Initially, it is the world of God's justice.

But we enter it because it is also the world of God's mercy and grace. This aspect of the world sustains us in our contemplation of the harsh reality of the world.

In the exercises of the second week, we explore the world of grace. But our identification with this world is tested repeatedly, as we enter the fallen world in which we live and the ways in which people naturally act there. The world of grace is never allowed to become a comfortable world of our own making and imagining.

The first meditation of the second week establishes the relationship between these two worlds of consequence and of grace. Ignatius moves from the broad perspective in which the Blessed Trinity see the whole expanse of the world, and that all are dying and going to hell, to a narrow focus on the house and room of our Lady in Galilee. This is the world of grace.

This broadening and narrowing of focus continues throughout the Exercise. We see the condition and fate of people on earth—their colour, sicknesses, wars, peace, and their dying. This is the empirical world of variety and change. This view then gives way to the world to which we were introduced in the first week. Here, people live in darkness, live, die and go to hell. This is the world of consequences. Thirdly, the focus narrows to consider the events of Mary's life: the offer made, her response, and the Incarnation of the Son of God. This is the small world of grace. In the course of the exercise, the focus changes constantly, as the exercitant attends to what is said and is done at each level. So, Ignatius brings together a realistic view of the public world of the retreatant, the reality of judgment, and the path by which God has saved us from judgment. At the conclusion of the exercises, we are invited to seek to imitate and to follow Jesus who embodies the movement of grace.

In the course of the second week, Ignatius dwells increasingly on the world of grace. We are to focus on and to identify affectively with Jesus Christ, and to desire to follow his way. The shame that comes from the recognition that we have been saved by grace from our natural fate is now overtaken by the desire to give ourselves to the world of grace by following Jesus.

The depth and genuineness of our identification with the path of Jesus, however, are tested by repeated reference to the ways in which we respond to our public world. Even details which seem to invite sentimentality are in fact hard-edged. When Ignatius

suggests in the meditation on the Nativity, for example, that we enter the scene as a little slave, the detail is not fanciful sentiment. It echoes the image of the soul imprisoned within the body, and points precisely to the way in which we belong in the world of grace. It is not an invitation to flights of fancy, but a naming of the objective world.

The risk of sentimentality inherent in identifying with Jesus and with Mary is met also by the thematic meditations of the second week. Each of these presents a realistic account of the public world and of the way in which people respond within it. We are to identify with this world, and to reflect on our own responses. The meditation on the Two Standards opposes the way of the world to that of Christ. It invites us to seek to follow the way of Christ, but weighs the desire fully against the reality of the world and of the way in which people act within it.

The meditation on the Three Classes of Men also confronts us realistically with the attitude which people generally take to wealth, and challenges us to test the rhetoric of our identification with Christ against our instinctive attitudes to the external world. It provides the realistic context within which we can come to a proper decision. The testing of our identification with Christ is extended in the meditation on the Three Kinds of Humility. As we enter the different kinds of response to Christian living with the public world we can test our immediate feelings of identification with Christ against the deeper identification of our heart with the world, and so come to realism in our following of Christ.

The exercises of the second week, then, explore more deeply the moment of grace through entering Christ's life. We are taken outside of ourselves. Ignatius meets the risk that we will domesticate our identification with Christ by requiring us to test our response against realistic and conventional ways of acting in our world.

The movement of the Exercises of the third and fourth weeks is distinguished by the deepening affective identification with Christ. In the first exercise of the third week, we seek shame that the Lord is going to his passion for our sins, just as we had in the first week. But in the subsequent meditations we are led to identify with Christ as friend: to sorrow with him in sorrow. Similarly, in the fourth week, we seek joy and gladness with Christ in his joy and glory. Ignatius assumes that by this stage we shall be able at once to look realistically at our world, and to identify with the path of Christ. We shall not use the image of Christ to shape a comfortable world.

The identification with Christ of the third and fourth weeks of the Exercises lead to the Contemplation for Attaining Love. This exercise resumes and integrates the movements which have led to it. We are drawn again into the world outside ourselves, which describe a place of God's blessing, life and activity which is made available to us. The whole world is now recognized as the place of grace. The affective identification with God as the giver of all demands the purified heart which has been tested in the previous exercises.

Identification and identity

This outline of the Spiritual Exercises suggests that we build our Christian identity by consistently moving outwards in prayer and life. Our focus of attention is not upon ourselves and our images of the world and of God, but on the reality of God and of the world as it is given to us. The easy identification of the heart with Christ is therefore tested regularly against the real and often disconcerting reality of the public world of commerce and politics and the equally uncompromising patterns of Christ's path.

Secondly, the identification which the Exercises demand is difficult, for it supposes that the world is simultaneously real as we know it in experience and as we know it through faith, and that we must enter its reality through both paths.

The world of the Exercises is the world of our experience. In prayer, we do not enter the stories of the gospel as historians. The clothing of the characters, the structures of society and the conflicts are those of our own days as are the feelings which they arouse in us. So our prayer takes us into a world whose challenge is the greater because it is foreign to us.

That familiarity, however, is challenged by the theological context within which our public world is set. Our conventional attitudes to the world and popular wisdom are challenged by the values recognized in faith. While we enter the lives, goals and characteristic ways of living in our society, we also see that the necessary context of those lives is the final choice between heaven and hell. We recognize also both the insignificance of the village house of Mary to the conventional eye, and its central importance within salvation.

Those of us whose natural spiritual home is the West of the twentieth century may find it peculiarly difficult to look at the world with a single glance which is informed both by faith and by our secular experience. For culturally we have two distinct ways

of entering stories. We can do so by historical and sociological reflection, in which we are left as detached and objective observers. Or we enter the stories as fiction which can be significant for our lives. This latter approach to stories generally situates them in a timeless world, where the issues have to do with the human heart in its immediate relationships to God and others. It is not easy to include within the story the public world of our experience.

The challenge of the Exercises is to overcome this dissociation between the public and the theological imagination, which is also a dissociation within identity between the private and the public self. We are to see the world from a perspective in which we are simultaneously political analysts and theologians.

Thirdly, within the Exercises, we establish our Christian identity slowly by gradually identifying with Christ. We come to identify with him affectively only after identifying contemplatively with a range of sinners whose life we share but whose fate we have been spared. Moreover, our growing identification with Christ continually needs to be tested by being set against our identification with the public world and the ways in which we act there. To enter the world of grace will always be against the background of the real world in which we sinners live. So we do not assume identification with Christ as something natural, but as a grace to be sought. Our rhetoric of prayer always jumps ahead of our heart and our hands.

This approach to identification can be illustrated by homely examples. The practice in many parishes on Good Friday of having the people take the parts of the crowd and of the villains in the Passion reading makes deeper sense. We enter the story as sinners who belong to a world in which the cross is the natural result of our actions. As sinners, we are drawn into the story of grace, and come to wish to identify with the path of Jesus. But is is only by identifying with Pilate and the Jewish leaders and crowds that it becomes safe and realistic to identify with Christ. A premature identification with Christ in the Passion narrative is likely to be sentimental. We then identify Christ with the aspects of our lives in which we are victims, and nurture his image for our own comfort. The consequences of doing this unreflectively can be seen in some forms of anti-Semitism, where identification of ourselves as victims with Christ legitimates hatred and scorn for the other actors in the story, whom we identify as our persecutors. By

cultivating the image of Christ, it is possible then to project on to the Jews of our own day responsibility for our discontents.

Identification with the powers who rule the public world of the gospel, however, requires a thoroughly worldly and informed vision of the world. The logic of the Exercises leads us inexorably to ask where we can gain and maintain this vision in such a way that we can integrate it with our identification with Christ.

In the Exercises, the perspective is given by the desire to follow the path of the poor, humiliated and powerless Jesus. The reality of this desire is tested in prayer against the way in which the public world operates and the part which we play within it. So, too, the life which embodies identification with Jesus needs to be tested and shaped by engagement with the public world. If we reflect on Christ's values and on the way in which the public world works, then the proper form of public engagement is from the side of the victim. This perspective alone enables us properly to identify both with Christ and with the public world. Any other standpoint inevitably leads to a split vision.

The power of this perspective can be seen in many lives and places. I have noticed it most strongly in workers and refugees in the camps. It is very common for volunteer workers to find that the gospel jumps off the page at them in situations where they live their lives with victims of the same order which provides the volunteers themselves with their security. Identification with Christ is easy there. But its facility derives from the fact that it is difficult not to identify with the world whose consequences are written in the lives of refugees. People recognize Christ and are drawn to his values in a world where they are patently disregarded.

Conclusion

I have argued in this article that the shaping of Christian identity comes from going out of ourselves to identify with the public world in which we live and where God's movement towards us in Christ takes place. We are not called to enter a religious world, but to recognize the real world with the vision that comes from faith and from accurate observation. Although the shape of this double identification with Christ and with our world will vary for different people and times, it will always lead to a tension between the world of our experience and God's path. For as we seek to identify with Christ, aspects of the world which we had taken for granted as natural are unmasked as contrary to Christ. To identify with Christ

is to resolve this tension in God's favour, and to find life there. This is caught beautifully in a totally unsentimental prayer by a Laotian village woman who contracted leprosy when she was a girl. Her public world is that of an agricultural society.

> Lord, you have come and asked everything of me, and I have given you all that I have. I loved to run in the woods and to go walking, and you took away my legs. I loved to gather flowers in the springtime sun, and you took away my hands. Because I am a woman, I loved to admire the beauty of my hair, the delicacy of my fingers and the grace of my body. Now I am nearly bald, and instead of nimble fingers, I can rely only on stiff and unresponsive wooden sticks.
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> But Lord, look how my beautiful, my woman's body has become a ruin. Faced with all you have done to me, I do not rebel. I thank you. For all eternity, I shall say, thank you, for if I die this night, I know that my life has been marvellously fulfilled. In living my life, I have been graced beyond anything that my heart desired when I was a small girl.