

THE IGNATIAN SPIRITUAL EXERCISES AND THE NEW WORLD-VIEW

By ANDREW J. DUFNER

World-view

EVERYONE LIVES WITH A WORLD-VIEW. All of us have an orientation to the world that situates us with respect to the earth and its happenings, and to our fellow humans and other creatures who live with us on this planet. Our world-view is constructed from the totality of our life experiences. It is made up of womb and birth experiences, of our formative sicknesses and/or health, of interactions with other humans, genetic sensitivities and insensitivities, physical and cultural circumstances, linguistic environments and so on. It is the prevailing myth within which we live.

Physical world-view

A most significant foundational component of this world-view is derived from our interactions with the physical universe.¹ Reflections within the poverty of riches of our sense data give us our understandings of cause and effect as well as their scope and ubiquity; of time and its passage; of life, its features and significance; of what movement involves and leads to; of what it means for us and other things to be shaped in our unique way and to be related to other shaped beings in space; of the implications of colour and sound; of height, depth and their analogues; the finitude or infinity of extension, time and duration; of what exertion does, and of its power and limitations; of exuberance and lethargy; of what is good for us or not; of momentum or persistence; energy, force, violence, gentleness, and the conditions both requisite for these and the characteristics consequent upon them; of growth, texture, tone, progress, information, process, warmth, connectedness, harmony and interdependence. All of these and innumerable similar features of our world-view are formed from and conditioned by our human, sentient, earth-based perceptions.

Even more fundamentally, our very perceptions themselves and the corresponding scope of our subjective endeavours based on these perceptions are shaped by our interpretations of our immediate experi-

read more at www.theway.org.uk

ences of the physical world. Had we grown up on the moon, or under water, or in the vacuum of outer space our world-view would be significantly other.

For some, this way of being in the world is quite explicit. For example, it may be expressed as Ignatius did in the First Week of the Exercises as a place of alienation: I may 'see in imagination my soul as a prisoner in this corruptible body, and . . . consider my whole composite being as an exile here on earth, cast out to live among brute beasts'. Or it may be expressed in the style of Thomas Berry as the inextricable weave within which I find myself; the universe and God:

The human emerges not only as an earthling, but also as a worldling. We bear the universe in our beings as the universe bears us in its being. The two have a total presence to each other and to that deeper mystery out of which both the universe and ourselves have emerged.²

For many others, their physical world-view is unexamined and functions only implicitly as the pervasive foundation for their relationships with the rest of creation and with other people. I may have lived formative years restricted to an inner-city war zone of Belfast or Los Angeles. What then would be my images, symbols and myths of the earth? What would I be missing? Or I may have grown up in the upper Amazon valley or in a hollow of the Ozark mountains of Missouri. How under those formative circumstances would I characterize my living in relationships with my surroundings? Perhaps my world experience was always shaped by the snow and cold of my life above the Arctic circle. How would that have focused my attitudes, concerns and expectations? What would be my riches? My poverties?

But whether it is recognized, appropriated or not, all of us carry a functional world-view inside of us. And it radically shapes our lives, our dreams, our hopes, our visions of the possible, the boundaries of our imaginations, the ways we interact with other people and with the earth and our other earth-community members.³ It is the background myth within which we live and move and have our being. It is the context which shapes and colours our experience of God and guides us along the paths we take to gain intimacy with the One who loved us into life, and draws us on to life's fullness. We pray out of our world-view. We love from within that context.

Science and a new world-view

Of crucial significance, most of us do not live in the same world our primitive ancestors did. We have not grown up with the ambient world

experiences of Abraham or Jesus, Aquinas or Ignatius. We have hearing aids and heart transplants, antibiotics, compact discs, photographs from Mars, light and heat at night from nuclear fires, computers that fly us through the air, television weather pictures from outer space. We are also moving along a trajectory leading to a functioning world of virtual realities. Our formative environments of culture and civilization have not left us with only unaided sense data gleaned from the pristine earth. The sharing of individual and collective experiences through time has created a new world-view. Such knowledge is cumulative, progressive.

As a human our world-view began from unaided sense experience (interpreted though it always is), and very soon in our cultural history we began to invent and use instruments designed to expand on the exploratory powers of simple sense perceptions. Much can be known about stars or insects by watching them carefully with the naked eye, but microscopes and telescopes have extended our vision and potential insights a millionfold. Other instrumentations, from litmus paper to particle accelerators, have probed the cosmos in myriad ways that are not extensions of our senses. This new knowledge is not merely more of the same. It often provides radical fractures from the past which are even more significant than the coming of vision to a person born blind, or of hearing to one born deaf. A whole new world opens up before us. The cross-cultural cumulative results of this are collected in what has come to be called the scientific understanding of the universe: a new world-view.

The analogy with sight and hearing is a good one. The universe is not soundless. It in fact tells us of itself through vibrations in the air. Winds do rustle through the leaves. People can easily exchange meanings at a distance in the dark. Nor is ours a world without colour, stars or viruses. Grey gulls do cry in wheeling flight aloft, and forked lightning crackles across the boiling black clouds. Without such sense instruments as eyes and ears we would have thought otherwise. In simple fact we would not have thought about any such things at all! We would have been suffering from a perceptual poverty that would have had us describing the nature of the universe and of our experience within it very differently. Indeed our understandings of the world, but for improbable, contextually inhuman epistemological precisions, would have been not merely incomplete, they would have been wrong, factually incorrect, not true.

Similarly, we now know that our senses, splendid instruments though they are, are quite narrow windows on the phenomena which make up our world. We cannot feel on our faces the daily fluctuations of the solar wind, nor sense with our outstretched hands the warmth of the still glowing residue of the cosmic fire from which we came. The wash of

neutrinos from our solar furnace, pouring through and around us at light speeds, eludes even our wildest imaginations. The most penetrating human gaze cannot pick up the slightest magnetic resonance image from a pulsing human heart. Other instruments, however, can pick out each of these and infinitely more with relative ease. Naked, we are senseless to all but a few faint strains of the great cosmic symphony that is going on all around and within us. We stand uncomprehendingly before all but the most miniscule of communications from most of cosmic reality. And our matching ignorance is truly astronomical. The earth is not flat, nor the moon made of green cheese. The sun does not travel its circular path around the earth (though most of us would have difficulty demonstrating any of those on our own), and yet the world-view of all but a small percentage of earth's population is every bit as primitive and unfactual.

What, too, of the mistaken imagery, symbols and modelling that are built on such erroneous presuppositions? What of social, political, ecclesial, psychological, philosophical and theological – spiritual! – structures assembled from and within such unreal foundations? Self-consistent they may be. Applicable to some hypothetical worlds, perhaps, but not to the one God gave us as our home. They are perforce incomplete and inadequate at best. More likely they are dysfunctional and proportionately dangerous to life itself.

And what of the missing imagery and modelling that knowledgeable and fertile human imaginations could possibly construct from the new world-view? What of new relational modalities growing from such revolutions which would be more appropriate among peoples, and between people, the earth and other earth community members? What of the new natural law to be uncovered and developed as the basis for human behaviours within these new contexts? What of prophetic dreams undreamed and hopes lying dormant, unawakened by the light of these new revelations of ourselves and of the earth?

Ignatius was a person of his own age, his own place, time, gender and cultural environment. So too are we. Much has been written of Ignatius' world-view. But of much greater significance, what is ours? What is mine? Dare I be honest? In what ways is it more than Neanderthal? Is it Romantic? Classical? Einsteinian? Do I know? Let us explore a few implications of the new world-view for the Exercises. These may help toward an examination of our consciousness.⁴

THE IGNATIAN EXERCISES AND THE NEW WORLD-VIEW

First Principle and Foundation

Before beginning the Exercises Ignatius urges us to come to a faith-inspired, heart-felt appreciation of why God has put us on this earth and what the general implications of this are for us. He says something like: We are here to save our souls by giving praise, reverence and service to God; so choose only those things that will help fulfil that purpose and let the rest go. His is a radical, clear and noble orientation in life.

Our contemporary critique of that proposition as Ignatius expresses it is that it is not sufficiently scriptural in orientation, and it is too privatized in its soteriology. Scripture has it that we are to love God, love our neighbour, and in doing this attain eternal life (Lk 10:25–28).

Notice that Ignatius' orientation in this propaedeutic to the Exercises is toward things, not people, and that there is an absence of mutuality in these relationships with other creatures. That very well fits a masculine view of sixteenth-century cosmology. Ignatius' universe was of course Ptolemaic: concentric heavenly spheres, in which each lower layer was moved by the next one higher until there was finally an unmoved mover. He would have taken for granted that whatever is moved is moved by another, and that that is a full expression of the physical relationships between things. He could not have shared even the Newtonian insight that the universe is radically non-hierarchical: that whatever is moved also reciprocally moves the mover—that all motion is mutual motion. In consequence he would have thought that the crude science of his day studied things, instead of realizing as we now do that all of science is concerned with relationships. His world could see humans as isolated agents created by God to use things for their own human ends, instead of appreciating as we now do in the new world-view that nothing lives in isolation from the rest of creation; that there is no goal of human life separable from common weal of the entire biotic community. For Ignatius it would have been two commandments, to love God and to love one's neighbour. In the new world-view these are inextricably one: there is no loving God apart from loving one's neighbour, and one's neighbour includes the whole of creation.

Thus the First Principle and Foundation in the light of the new world-view could be re-expressed in words like these: Humans are created to live in harmony with all that is. Our first responsibility in response to God's gift of life is to discover and make our own what that harmony entails.

The First Week

The focus of the First Week of the Exercises is God's beneficence in the face of my sinfulness. Much meditation energy is spent on the nature of sin and of how I have participated in that by my actions. For the scope of my actions, in the examination of conscience Ignatius has us look at the places where we have lived, our dealings with others, and the offices we have held. The only place he mentions the rest of the cosmos in these considerations is in his invitation to stand amazed that all other creatures have continued to support me, to serve me, as sinful as I am.

The new world-view would start from a fresh perspective on our sinfulness, one wholly new to our times. It sees us as embedded within a new natural law of absolute and overweening importance, indeed one on which all of life on earth depends. It has been variously expressed in words such as these:

Morality is how you behave when you belong . . . to each other, to living things, to the cosmos. Either morality is deep ecology or it isn't morality any more.⁵

A thing is right when it tends to preserve the integrity, stability, and beauty of the biotic community. It is wrong when it tends otherwise.⁶

This new natural law, as is clear, is based upon the world as known through modern science.⁷ It is radically relational, recognizing that everything that we do has its effect on everything else in the cosmos. There are no morally indifferent acts.

If we hold as our religious ancestors did, that sin is a choiceful aberration from God's way with us, then some immediate conclusions follow. To choose to live, as in much of the industrialized First World, in a personal life-style that consumes six to ten times the energy per capita as the Third World is immoral. To behave as though we believe that the earth can sustain an indefinitely large human population is sinful. To eat as recklessly as does most of the First World, of unhealthy, artificial pseudo-foods, is not God's way. To buy into the consumerist mentality that floods our planet with items extravagant in energy or other materials to be thrown away irretrievably is scandalous. Not to recycle what can be retrieved for re-use is against the natural law. To pour into our atmosphere the hydrocarbons from our cars, deodorant cans, refrigeration units, power plants and airplanes without carefully assessing the risk is culpable involvement in serious sin.

These are sins of the massive human family, of course, but they also involve personal choices. I can educate myself on the planetary conse-

quences of every aspect of my life. I can choose not to drive a motor vehicle except when a fuller life is at stake for all the living. When the good of the biotic community requires machines, I can choose more efficient, less polluting devices at every level of my life. I can discard the consumerist mentality entirely. I can select food that is low on the energy chain. I can protest the participation in immoral behaviours by social agencies. I can refuse to act as though some persons have fewer human rights and less dignity than others on the basis of their age, gender, ethnic or social origins, sexual orientation, size, shape or agility, political or religious beliefs. I can choose to respect every form of life, and each member of God's community of beings, honouring the interconnectedness of all that is.

The Second Week

In the Second Week of the Exercises we are invited to experience the incarnation of Christ, and how God's love for us expresses itself in the deeds of Jesus. We are encouraged to open ourselves in response to this God who so loved us, that we too might choose to gift of ourselves to others as whole-heartedly as God has done for us in Jesus.

From the point of view of the new vision of the world, our chief failure seems to me to be that we have not taken the implications of the incarnation seriously. The widely publicized and scandalous detachment of religion and religious persons from the world-wide ecological challenges, opportunities and disasters of our times is an obvious sign that as religious people we have failed to continue learning what the incarnation of Christ means. We give credence to a fundamentally historical religion. We worship a God who has entered into the process of human evolution. We live the awesome reality of a God who is incarnate now in us. Being the body of Christ in our world carries divine-human responsibilities. For our times we have the only hands God has. We are the instruments of God's human love, justice and peace.

Some still behave as though this has no consequences peculiar to our own time. They think that we have exhausted God's significance for us by reflections on credal crystallizations of our ancestors, instead of appreciating that if God became enmattered, then matter does matter!¹⁸ Scripture does not tell us that God took on a human nature, it says that the Word became flesh. Surely if God has taken that seriously, then that challenge is ours.

To appreciate the revelation that the Word became flesh we must know not only who the Word is, but what flesh is. Only the most

miniscule knowledge of what flesh is can be obtained by looking at it, by touching it, listening to it, tasting or smelling it—let alone thinking about it. The unfolding truth of matter yields to the methods of science and to reflection on its conclusions. Over ninety-nine per cent of what we know about flesh and enfleshment has been learned in the last few decades. What does that new knowledge say to us? If it is irrelevant to our faith, then our faith is irrelevant to our world. Neither Genesis nor Jesus has meaning outside of our understanding of what enmatterment means.

The new world-view makes it clear that the universe is evolving, that no life nor life form is static. Jesus was born into this evolving universe. He stepped into a human condition that was, as for each one of us, not what it was before nor would it ever be the same again. It is the nature of enfleshed humans to be embedded in the process of change. Our faith informs us that Christ was born into this same process, is alive within it today, and will be with us in his fullness when our epoch reaches its future climax in either cataclysmic fire or ice.

But now we know in the new world-view that this entire cosmos, every fluid blob, every mote and massive star of it, is fine-tuned for life. From the very beginning of the cosmos, if there were any slightest physical feature of its fundamental behaviours changed, life not only would not, but in fact could not, have happened. Each and every speck of cosmic matter is an anthropic hologram envisioning life. So much for science speaking.

Is it still surprising then, that:

In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God. All things came into being through him, and without him not one thing came into being. What has come into being in him was life, and the life was the light of all people. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it. . . . And the Word became flesh and lived among us, . . . full of grace and truth. . . . From his fullness we have all received, grace upon grace. (John 1:1–5,14,16)

The living Word impregnates matter with life, life from God. Quite clearly we now have a fresh vision of the truth behind the ancient realization that the earth is God's first great sacrament. Pro-life is an urgency written into the very stuff of the universe. It means pro-trees, pro-fish, pro-owls, -oysters, -lions, -flowers, as well as pro-human. It urges clean air, pure water, unpolluted soil, conservation at every level of our human existence. Its anthem could be Paul's from Colossians 1.

The Third Week

Here we encounter the passion and death of Jesus. We experience with Christ the natural effects of entropy in death, and the effects of moral entropy in the way his dying came about. We are encouraged by the new world vision to appreciate that pain and death are natural features of life itself, our own included; that we are born into these gifts as surely as we are born into the gift of life; and that our own choices to frustrate the fullness of life, often through fear of death, contribute to avoidance and denial of even the little deaths of change, suffering, illness, psychic or emotional pain. These are negations of both the truths of the new world-view and of our faith in the resurrected life which is ours by God's promise.

The Fourth Week

In this Week of the Exercises Ignatius invites us to meditate on the resurrection of Jesus. He concludes the Exercises with a contemplation on how God shows love for us through divine actions. We are invited to ask for an intimate knowledge of the manifold blessings we have received, and that filled with gratitude we may respond with love and service of our own.

This contemplation focuses on how God lives in all creatures, and lives in me as one created in God's image, giving existence, sentient life and intelligence. We are invited to consider how God works and labours for me in all creatures, 'the elements, plants, fruits, cattle, etc.', giving them being, conserving them, conferring life, sensation and so on.

This scenario is surely an apt one for launching a prayerful believer into a life of full participation in the ecological realities of our time. An informed contemplation of nature leads to wonder, wonder to humility, awe and gratitude, gratitude to worship and the desire to respond in the same spirit of compassionate love that God has shown for us, for the earth and for the whole biotic community. The spiral returns to where it began, but with enhanced intensity. Concluding the contemplation on God's actions in nature, Ignatius says 'Then I will reflect on myself'.

NOTES

¹ Though there is not space here to explain these interactions, happily there are numerous books, easily available, that do that very well. Let me suggest as authors: Heinz Pagels, Lynn Margulis, James Trefil, Rachel Carson, Carolyn Merchant, Lewis Thomas, Gary Snyder, Loren Eiseley, David Rains Wallace, Ilya Prigogine and Isabelle Stengers and Donald Hughes.

² Berry, Thomas: *The dream of the earth* (Sierra Club, San Francisco CA, 1988), p 132.

³ For an outstanding, recent explication of this reality, including its historical development in the Church, see Ruether, Rosemary Radford: *Gaia & God: an ecofeminist theology of earth healing*, (Harper, San Francisco, 1992), pp 310.

⁴ For one of the very best and readable explications of the new world-view and its sacramental implications I would recommend the fascicle by Toolan, David S.: *'Nature is a Heraclitean fire': reflections on cosmology in an ecological age* from the Studies in the Spirituality of Jesuits series (St Louis MO, November 1991).

⁵ Spoken by David Steindl-Rast at a Berkeley, California conference with Fritjof Capra on 'Belonging to the Universe'. Cf also their book by the same title (Harper, San Francisco CA, 1991).

⁶ Leopold, Aldo: Essay on 'The land ethic' from *A Sand County almanac* (Ballantine NY, 1966).

⁷ Working within the new natural law for a viable ethics is an effort replete in the ecological literature. Try Swimme, Brian: *The universe is a green dragon: a cosmic creation story* (Bear & Co., Santa Fe NM, 1985); Berry, Wendell: *Home economics* (North Point, San Francisco CA, 1987) ref 2; Berry, Thomas with Clarke, Thomas: *Befriending the earth: a theology of reconciliation between humans and the earth* (Twenty-Third Publications, Mystic CT, 1991); and Lovelock, James: *The ages of Gaia: a biography of our living earth* (Norton, London, 1988).

⁸ Ask any contemporary person of faith to explain what the Nicene Creed means to them. You will typically hear either a cascade of formalities—words without functional meaning—or an honest, usually apologetic, expression of ignorance. The symbols that speak to a twentieth-century person, rife throughout the rest of our linguistic culture, are not there, nor is there any hint of prophetic enticement to an unfolding mystery in words that we can hear.