

THE CONCEPT OF IGNATIAN MYSTICISM

Beyond Rahner and de Guibert

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IT WAS PROBABLY IN THE 1930s THAT PEOPLE began to write about 'Ignatian mysticism'. Any earlier than that, the expression would have sounded strange, even meaningless. Ignatius' spiritual legacy appeared to consist of methods and discipline, avoiding the so-called higher reaches of prayer. The only arguments were about whether this sobriety reflected a practicality to be proud of, or a dreary functionality that looked just tawdry in comparison to what Bernard, Eckhart, or the great Carmelites could offer.

However, at the turn of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, a wider range of Ignatian source material had become available for the first time, and by the 1930s a richer, more complex picture of Ignatius was beginning to emerge. This revaluation of Ignatius, profoundly influential on the Society of Jesus and through it on Roman Catholicism generally, still remains to be charted fully. Its protagonists came from different cultures and different theological backgrounds. Their findings were not always welcome to authority, and the process was far from straightforward.

Two works from this period have nevertheless come to be seen as classic accounts of Ignatius the mystic: Karl Rahner's essay, 'The Ignatian Mysticism of Joy in the World', first published in 1937,¹ and Joseph de Guibert's *The Jesuits: Their Spiritual Doctrine and Practice*, reflecting work done from 1936 onwards.² It may be difficult to interpret these writings fairly. Both texts are attractively simple—even though both authors were also participating in complex scholastic

¹ Most easily available in *Theological Investigations*, vol. 3, translated by Karl-H. Krüger (London: Darton, Longman and Todd, 1963), pp. 277-293; original title 'Die ignatianische Mystik der Weltfreudigkeit'. There are some differences between the original German text in Rahner's collected essays, *Schriften zur Theologie*, and the version first published in *Zeitschrift für Aszese und Mystik*, 12 (1937), pp. 121-137.

² Translated by William J. Young and edited by George E. Ganss (St Louis: Institute of Jesuit Sources, 1986). The original was not published till 1953; de Guibert's death, World War II, and the reservations of Włodimir Ledóchowski, the Jesuit General until 1942, had all contributed to the delay.

debates about the underlying issues.³ Both authors begin from an assumption that the normative mystic is the contemplative monk—one who has renounced the world and withdrawn into a life of purely passive prayer. Both then argue that this conception of the mystic can fairly be extended to Ignatius. Rahner proposes that the single-minded dedication to God characteristic of monasticism can be lived out also in other contexts, indeed in any life responsive to God's grace. Thus the disciple engaged in active or prestigious work may count as a kind of *honorary* mystic, a mystic by extension. For his part, de Guibert presents Ignatius as exemplifying a *particular class* of mysticism, a mysticism *of service*. De Guibert draws on a distinction between 'seraphic', 'cherubic' and 'angelic' mystics, classifying Ignatius in terms of the third:

... among whom these infused gifts are not directed exclusively at the union of the purely spiritual human faculties to God, but extend down to more material capacities, capacities for doing things, remembering, imagining—capacities which, in themselves and intrinsically, are thus tending not just towards union but also towards service.

De Guibert notes 'the complete absence of what could be called the "nuptial" aspect of mystical union' in Ignatius, as also the lack of reference to a 'transforming union', in which our own life somehow disappears and Christ takes us over. With Ignatius, things are different:

What dominates all his relations with the divine Persons, with Christ, is the loving, humble attitude of a servant, a concern to discern even tiny nuances in the service he wants to give, the generosity needed to carry this service out perfectly and on a grand scale. . . .⁴

Rahner and de Guibert were right in seeing that the kind of mystical life modelled by Ignatius did not fit within the categories available to them. However, they did not go far enough: they sought to modify what passed for a theological concept of the mystical, whereas what was needed was a wholesale replacement. Once such a replacement is established, then Ignatian mysticism looks different. It ceases to appear as a legitimate, free-standing alternative to other forms of mysticism. Jesuits and Carmelites clearly have different, mutually exclusive

³ On Rahner in this regard, see my *Karl Rahner and Ignatian Spirituality* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001).

⁴ De Guibert, *The Jesuits*, pp. 55-56.

vocations; Ignatian and Carmelite spiritualities, or mysticisms, however, are complementary, and we all need to draw on both. 'Ignatian' in the phrase 'Ignatian mysticism' no longer denotes one example among others falling under the general category of 'mysticism'. It is rather that Ignatius articulates, in particular detail and clarity, some aspects of the one authentic mysticism common to all Christians, indeed to all human beings.

Spiritualities, Pilgrimages and Odysseys

Let us look more closely at the conventional concept of mysticism that de Guibert and Rahner were at once presupposing and reacting against. For Rahner in his 1937 essay, a Christian mystic is essentially a *monachos*, a solitary monk 'far from the world, alone in God':

The monk is fleeing from the light of this world into the Night of Sense and Spirit . . . so that the grace and mercy of the eternal God can come to him.⁵

Ignatius counts as a mystic because he still, for all his involvement in the world, lives in this spirit of exile. For his part, de Guibert can quote with approval a definition of the mystical as,

. . . a certain mode of prayer and union with God which is produced in some souls by the special action of grace. This action of God makes the prayer simple and passive, and includes an experiential 'taste' of God, or an immediate sense of God's purifying action, resulting in an infused contemplation properly so called.⁶

It is as though the spiritual life is a journey towards God—a God distant from us. What marks out the mystics is that they have somehow travelled further along the road than the rest of us. If we let this image control our understanding of the spiritual life, then the simple gospel prayer of Ignatius' *Spiritual Exercises* is suitable for the first steps. As we move on, however, something different begins to happen. After a phase of transition, a more 'contemplative', 'mystical' prayer begins. And now it is the great Carmelites, and other monastics, who must be our guides. 'Ignatian mysticism' is a contradiction in terms.

⁵ Karl Rahner, 'The Ignatian Mysticism', pp. 281-282.

⁶ Joseph de Guibert, *The Theology of the Spiritual Life*, translated from the fourth edition by Paul Barrett (London: Sheed and Ward, 1954 [1937]), n. 8 (p. 10).

De Guibert did, as we have seen, try to get beyond this, and nevertheless develop a concept of Ignatian mysticism. But he remained committed to the underlying model of the spiritual life as a journey towards the beyond. His failure to be critical on this point undermined his attempts to reconsider Ignatius. In the introduction to his book, de Guibert drew on what he took to be a medieval image: the schools of spirituality could be compared to bridges of different kinds, constructed to different designs, put together out of different materials, suitable for different situations. But all had the same function: to bear the weight of those who crossed over (*porter les passants*).⁷ Spiritualities are essentially mechanisms of transition; when we follow them, we become different from who we were.

Such metaphors are traditional and venerable, and must not be outlawed. Equally, however, we must guard against using them uncritically, or pushing their implications too far. If the God of Jesus Christ is Emmanuel, God-with-us, then the idea of spirituality as a journey elsewhere can easily mislead us. T. S. Eliot famously began the last verse-paragraph of his *Four Quartets* with the following lines:

We shall not cease from exploration
And the end of all our exploring
Will be to return where we started
And know the place for the first time.⁸

The spiritual journey ends not in some distant goal but in a homecoming; the pilgrimage turns out to have been an odyssey all along:

It is not in heaven, that you should say, 'Who will go up to heaven for us, and get it for us so that we may hear it and observe it?' Neither is it beyond the sea, that you should say, 'Who will cross to the other side of the sea for us, and get it for us so that we may hear it and observe it?' No, the word is very near to you; it is in your mouth and in your heart for you to observe. (Deuteronomy 30:12-14)

The word has indeed become flesh; no authentic Christian mysticism can separate us from the human condition, because humanity has been taken within God's very being.

⁷ *The Jesuits*, pp. 8-9. The substance of this passage had appeared already as 'En quoi diffèrent réellement les diverses écoles catholiques de spiritualité?' *Gregorianum*, 19 (1938), pp. 263-279.

⁸ 'Little Gidding', in *The Complete Poems and Plays of T. S. Eliot* (London: Faber, 1969), p. 197.

It follows that our primary spiritual task is to respond to God's presence among us as we are. This subverts radically the distinctions conventional in the neo-scholastic manuals of spiritual theology. If gospel prayer involves engagement with fleshly reality, it cannot be simply a task for beginners; nor, conversely, can 'advanced' prayer be defined in terms of disengagement. Spirituality also ceases to be in any special way linked to the renunciations of vowed religious life. The call to holiness, rather, is universal, and God's own self is to be found not only in exalted states of contemplative prayer, but also in everyday routine. Prayer obviously does become at a certain point simpler. But the onset of this phase, what John of the Cross describes as the passage from meditation to contemplation,⁹ must be seen simply as a reality of human spiritual development. Talk of 'God alone acting' or of human passivity must not mislead us. These phrases are only reporting what the process feels like; they do not indicate that any change has taken place in the metaphysical interplay of divine and created causality governing all that exists. The ultimate goal of the spiritual life is indeed a life beyond death, but it remains a human state, involving the resurrection of the body and the communion of saints: despite what is sometimes said, our ultimate destiny is both corporeal and corporate.¹⁰ If our eschatological state is to be truly a human one, if it is *we* who are to enjoy it, then there must be a continuity between what we shall be then and what we are now.

Bridge metaphors and journey metaphors have their place in Christian spirituality, but they must be governed by the Christian gospel of incarnation and grace, of God's self given irrevocably to creation. We have no need for a metaphysical engineering project, carrying us to some place beyond. We need rather to see spirituality as whatever helps us grow in trust. We need to learn right relationship with the world in which God has placed us, the world where God has chosen to dwell, the world in which we must remain if we are still to be human. 'We are separated from God not by intervals of space but by difference of affections', says Augustine; our need is not for transport, but for purification.¹¹

In their classic accounts of Ignatian mysticism, de Guibert and Rahner are not sufficiently radical. They are content to tinker with

⁹ *Ascent of Mount Carmel*, book 2, chapter 13.

¹⁰ The trenchant polemic by Josef Ratzinger on this point in *Eschatology: Death and Eternal Life*, translated by Michael Waldstein and Aidan Nichols (Washington: CUA Press, 1988 [1976]) is well worth reading.

¹¹ I draw here on Nicholas Lash, *Easter in Ordinary: Reflections on Human Experience and the Knowledge of God* (London: SCM, 1988), especially pp. 69, 96. The quotation from Augustine, borrowed from Lash, comes from *de Trinitate*, book 8, n. 7.

what were prevailing, sub-Christian accounts of the mystical; they did not subject these accounts to the drastic reworking simple Christianity demands. Neither author carries through his insights to their logical conclusion. Rahner notes that what he has presented as a version of consecrated monasticism, proper to Jesuits, was also material for 'a properly lay form of piety'. But he declines to explore the implications;¹² had he done so, he would have had to recast his whole argument. For his part, de Guibert, despite all his talk of a 'mysticism of service' with regard to Ignatius, regresses when he discusses Jesuit spirituality at large, and talks uncritically of 'high degrees of prayer', and of 'infused contemplation'. He does not recognise that even his version of Ignatian mysticism implies a concept of mysticism compatible with human activity, and hence calls these conventional categories into question.¹³

Ironically, the primary texts of the great Carmelites themselves talk of the most developed forms of prayer with a subtlety and richness that make talk of 'infused contemplation' seem laughably crass. John's *Living Flame of Love* evokes passionate encounter through luxuriant imagery of fire and wounding. For her part, Teresa's account precisely of the Seventh Mansions, where the spiritual marriage has occurred, shows that she knew all along what some Jesuits thought was a wisdom proper to Ignatius: '*this* is what prayer is for, my daughters; *this* is the point of this spiritual marriage—that from it always deeds, deeds should be coming to birth'.¹⁴

What Ignatius Brings to Christian Mysticism

It will not do, then, to say that Ignatian spirituality is *distinguished* by a facility for finding God in all things, or by a mode of contemplation that is somehow consistent with action. As worldly beings ourselves, we can find God only through the things of this world. The finding of God in the creation must characterize any Christian spirituality, and indeed any engagement between creatures and the transcendent Creator. When Rahner describes Ignatian mysticism as one of 'joy in

¹² 'The Ignatian Mysticism', p. 292. It should be remembered that this relatively well-known essay originated as a guest lecture, and is almost a piece of juvenilia. In his other writings, Rahner at least began to take things further; see my *Karl Rahner and Ignatian Spirituality*, especially pp. 84–98.

¹³ *The Jesuits*, pp. 558–565. For critical reflections on de Guibert, see John W. O'Malley, 'De Guibert and Jesuit Authenticity', available in the collection of O'Malley's reprinted articles, *Rome and the Renaissance* (London, Variorum, 1981), and now Joseph Veale, 'Saint Ignatius Asks, "Are You Sure You Know Who I Am?"', *Studies in the Spirituality of Jesuits*, 33/4 (September 2001), pp. 35–38 (Appendix 2).

¹⁴ *Interior Castle*, book 7, chapter 4, n. 6.

the world', when de Guibert writes eloquently of Ignatius' mysticism of service, they are not, despite how they cast their arguments, indicating anything particularly distinctive of Ignatius. It is rather that they are pointing up, stimulated by Ignatius, a general truth of the Christian life that their theological peers might have forgotten: experiential contact with God comes through creatures.

In what sense, then, if any, does Ignatius make any distinctive contribution to our understanding of 'the mystical'? Here I just begin on that large question, by considering the relationship between what Ignatius and John of the Cross tell us about the mystical life. It is a mistake, I contend, to think of Ignatian and Sanjuanist mysticisms as alternatives between which we have to choose. It is rather that Ignatius and John articulate and expand on different aspects of the mysticism common to all Christians, indeed all human beings.

Let us look at how the figure of Christ functions in the *Spiritual Exercises* and in John's double treatise *The Ascent of Mount Carmel* and *The Dark Night of the Soul*. For John, Christ is initially an example. He illustrates a process of stripping and recentring, both material and—more strikingly—spiritual:

... it can clearly be seen that it is not just that the soul has to move forward detached from all that is creaturely; it has also to travel dispossessed, annihilated, of all that is of its spirit.¹⁵

Christ models for all of us a death to self leading to rebirth—a rebirth to a new life centred more explicitly in God. Ignatian gospel prayer is obviously different: it encourages an interplay between Christ's life and one's own imagination, leading to reflection and colloquy. John at one point all but condemns this.¹⁶

It is striking how differently Ignatius and John respond to women in spiritual distress. Ignatius counsels Teresa Rejadell that her disturbance is coming from the enemy; it indicates a false humility, and it is there to be counteracted.¹⁷ John tells Juana de Pedraza that her disturbance comes from God:

You have never been better than now, because you have never been so humble or so dependent or so dismissive of yourself and of all

¹⁵ *Ascent of Mount Carmel*, book 2, chapter 7, n. 4.

¹⁶ *Ascent of Mount Carmel*, book 2, chapter 18, nn. 5-9.

¹⁷ Ignatius to Teresa Rejadell, 18 June 1536, in Saint Ignatius of Loyola, *Personal Writings*, translated by Joseph A. Munitiz and Philip Endean (London: Penguin, 1996), pp. 129-135. See further my 'Discerning Behind the Rules: Ignatius' First Letter to Teresa Rejadell', *The Way Supplement*, 64 (Spring 1989), pp. 37-50.

the things in the world . . . so it is a great mercy of God when he darkens them (your powers), and impoverishes the soul in such a way that it cannot, with them, err. . . .¹⁸

It is not, however, that John of the Cross and Ignatius disagree about how human beings relate to God. It is rather that their rhetorics highlight different aspects of that relationship. John stresses, starkly and relentlessly, the need to die to self in order to live in God; Ignatius' concern is with how that option is actually to be lived out amid the ambiguities of messy human situations. He knows that the enemy of human nature, crudely or subtly, can take on a pious guise attractive to the religiously committed, and he therefore provides a pedagogy of discernment. Neither author incorporates the concerns of the other systematically, and hence their formulations may appear contradictory; equally, neither excludes the other's concerns in principle. A lived Christian spirituality and mysticism can, perhaps should, profitably draw on both eclectically. No one needs to worry if the ends do not tie up.

Moreover, to repeat, John's rhetoric of passivity merely describes what it feels like to be undergoing a developmental transition; it is not committed to strange metaphysical claims about the complete suspension of creaturely activity. If one has this in mind, then what Ignatius and John say about the role of images in prayer begins to converge. John's scepticism about visions and locutions owes little if anything to a Platonism unintegrated into Christianity, and everything to how God is manifest in Christ's broken body. John imagines God speaking as follows:

'If for you I have now had all things spoken in my Word, which is my Son, and I don't have any other, what could I answer you with, or reveal to you, that would be more than this? Fix your eyes on him alone, because in him I have everything for you, spoken and revealed. . . . For you are asking for locutions and revelations that are partial: if you fix your eyes on him, you will find it in full, because he is my locution in full, my vision in full, and my revelation in full.'¹⁹

Mature faith involves a detachment from particular images, not because we have somehow moved into a mode of prayer independent

¹⁸ John of the Cross to Juana de Pedraza, 12 October 1589 (Letter 19).

¹⁹ *Ascent*, book 2, chapter 22, n. 5. I have learnt the importance of this passage in the interpretation of John from Iain Matthew, *The Impact of God: Soundings from St John of the Cross* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1995), pp. 123-125.

of the flesh, but rather because on Calvary God's identification with our condition is so total as to have become all-pervasive, unrestricted.

Ignatius' style and idiom is admittedly different. Nevertheless, he may share John's vision of how piety typically moves from a focus on imagery to a more diffused sense of the divine presence. For various reasons—Ignatius' verbal reticence, misunderstandings in the Vulgate text and in the Directories—commentators on Ignatius assign comparatively little importance to the Third and Fourth Weeks of the Exercises, even though they demand a considerable proportion of the time and energy of anyone undergoing the full process.²⁰ The petitions for the prayer in the Third Week involve a new, more intense and unitive identification with the crucified Christ—'shatteredness with Christ shattered' (Exx 203—*quebranto con Cristo quebrantado*). In the Fourth Week, we ask for a joy not simply of participating in the paschal mystery (as the Vulgate has it), but a rejoicing in Christ's own joy (Exx 221). Ignatius' texts are too few and fragmentary for us to be sure what he meant. But it is at least an attractive possibility that he is pointing towards something like the process of existential decentring that is John's explicit concern in the *Ascent* and the *Dark Night*. John, paradoxically, expends much time and effort in telling us how passive the process is; Ignatius honours this reality by reticence, by simply leaving the retreatant with the passion and resurrection narratives, and allowing time and space for the transformation to take place.

Moreover, at the culminating moments in the Ignatian texts, our apprehension of Christ ceases to be centred on an imagination of his body. Instead, the mystery of grace is seen as pervading the whole creation. The Fourth Week culminates in the Contemplation to Attain Love; the visions of Christ 'like a white body' give way to an experience at the Cardoner where it is 'not that he saw some vision, but understanding many things, spiritual things just as much as matters of faith and learning, and this with an enlightenment so strong that all things seemed new to him'.²¹ For both authors, particular realities recede as we apprehend the fullness of the Incarnation, and *all things*, our own consciousnesses included, become 'charged with the grandeur of God'.

It may be misleading, then, to see Ignatian mysticism as one type of mysticism among others. Ignatius offers us, rather, a distinctive articulation of the mystical reality common to all who are in the new

²⁰ See Brian O'Leary, 'Third and Fourth Weeks: What the Directories Say', *The Way Supplement*, 58 (Spring 1987), pp. 3-20; and my "'Our Lady" and the Graces of the Fourth Week', *The Way Supplement*, 99 (Autumn 2000), pp. 44-60.

²¹ *Autobiography*, nn. 29, 30.

creation. Ignatius' account stresses particularly the need for reflection and discernment about just *how* to live the gospel amid the shifting ambivalences of everyday situations. Evidently, the vocations of Ignatian and Carmelite religious differ, and are mutually exclusive. But the relationship between Ignatian and Carmelite mysticisms, or spiritualities, is different from that between Ignatian and Carmelite consecrated life. Whoever we are, we can, indeed should, draw on the wisdoms of other traditions besides our own. Spiritual wisdom is there to be shared, in principle with all who participate—whether explicitly or anonymously—in the mystery of Christ.

We might go further. In this article, 'spirituality', 'mysticism' and 'contemplation' have been used almost interchangeably. There is an important value reflected in this kind of usage: the mystical should not be detached from the ordinary life of faith. But perhaps there are nevertheless prophetic figures, people who live at the frontiers of a spiritual tradition, and who explore its internal tensions and anomalies. Perhaps it is for such people and their experience—experience involving greater rather than lesser involvement with the everyday's pain and perplexity—that the term 'mystical' should be reserved.²² If there is anything to be said for this suggestion, then it is not his elevated prayer states that make Ignatius a mystic, but rather his contribution to our understanding of ministry: his programmatic sensitivity to individuals; his provision of a spiritual pedagogy enabling us to engage with divine promptings not so easily recognised in more public settings; and his founding of a body of apostles dedicated to 'service at the frontiers', to the care of those whose needs are not met by existing structures.²³ On this account contemplative intimacy is not so much a matter of privileged prayer experiences as of prophetic, creative discipleship. It impels us beyond social and ecclesial convention into the ever greater mystery of God.

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²² I have taken this idea from the writings of Rowan Williams, especially 'The Prophetic and the Mystical: Heiler Revisited', *New Blackfriars*, 64 (1983), pp. 330-347, and *Teresa of Avila* (London: Geoffrey Chapman, 1991), pp. 150-158.

²³ See Ignacio Iglesias, "'Service at the Frontiers" in Jesuit Sources', *Review of Ignatian Spirituality (CIS)*, 27/1 (1996), 7-20.