

THE MYSTICAL WAY OF IMAGES AND CHOICE

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EASTERN CULTURE AND LIFE-STYLES are in fashion today. The East—and in particular the Buddhism practised in Tibet and Japan—evokes the esoteric, the mysterious, the mystical. It inspires decorators, cooks and bank-managers. Many people attend Zen courses. One can almost speak of the birth of a Western Zen Buddhism, marked by a striking emphasis on simplicity, on emptiness, on not-thinking.

Buddhist-Christian dialogue takes on something of the same quality. It seems to centre on the concepts of ‘emptiness’, ‘quiet’ and ‘non-being’—concepts that seem to attract and intrigue people today. There are indeed Christian mystics who have experienced God as ‘non-being’; classic examples are Meister Eckhart, Jan van Ruusbroec and John of the Cross. Their writings are a major resource for the Christian side in this dialogue. They speak of their experience of God’s utter reality in terms of not knowing and of negativity. They are constantly saying that God is ‘not this’ and also ‘not that’; for them God surpasses all that is definite or definable.

Ignatius Loyola does not normally appear in this company. In Buddhist-Christian dialogue, he seems to have nothing to say. One reason for this is that Ignatius’ mystical life has often been misunderstood, as many of the other essays in this collection illustrate. Another is that he makes such abundant use of the imagination in the *Spiritual Exercises*; his spirituality seems to stress a this-worldly choice (‘election’). Such use of the imagination in the process of learning about God is therefore quite different from a non-thinking and imageless approach to the Unknowable. The vacuum and the emptiness sought by ‘negative’ spirituality are filled by the imagination. But the imagination should not be written off too quickly. Ignatius used his imagination to learn about God as profoundly as any ‘negative mystic’ did. And his kind of spirituality too has a place in Buddhist-Christian dialogue.

Lectio divina

The monastic tradition of *lectio divina* starts from the conviction that we can approach God by means of a text. We can come to know God

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through words, pictures, symbols and the like. That, after all, is what we find in the Bible, where God is speaking to us, calling us to life, pointing out the kind of life we should lead. By listening to God's words, by trying to read God's message, human beings can enter into contact with God and learn to know God. Classically, *lectio divina* involved five steps: reading itself (*lectio*); pondering (*meditatio*); praying (*oratio*); envisaging (*contemplatio*); and working out (*applicatio*).¹

Following Roland Barthes and Antonio de Nicolás,² we can describe Ignatius' spiritual development as a process of learning to understand God's language. However, in Ignatius' case this process of coming to understand did not take place, as it might have done for a monk, through repeatedly reading the Bible, reflecting on it, and perhaps copying it. Ignatius seems to have read relatively little; and in the *Spiritual Exercises* he does not suggest that the exercitant should read the actual texts to be considered. Ignatius opened himself to God speaking not primarily through the word on paper but through images. As he tried to understand this picture-language, he noticed that God was using signs actually to speak to him personally. It was by means of pictures and signs that Ignatius and God drew closer to one another.

Reading (lectio)

For Ignatius, the actual reading which began his *lectio divina* was a reading of pictures. He recalled to his memory biblical scenes, and he used his memory, or rather his imagination, to go and meet God. Whenever he read a passage about Jesus and his followers from the *Vita Christi* or the *Flos Sanctorum*, he became curious. He wanted to know Jesus better and indeed to serve Jesus. So he set himself to imagining the life of Jesus.³ Devoutly, attentively, systematically, he 'read' these imagined pictures of the life of Jesus, and then tried to model his own life on them. Christ himself, who is the most perfect picture of God, became, in this phase of Ignatius' spiritual development, a mirror for him. He read these pictures of Christ's life with intense concentration, with the result that the person of Jesus became for him a person of his own day. Christ himself took on a new

¹ Ignatius obviously uses the words 'meditation' and 'contemplation' in a different sense, to distinguish different types of exercise.

² Roland Barthes, *Sade, Fourier, Loyola*, translated by Richard Miller (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1997 [1971]); Antonio T. de Nicolás, *Ignatius de Loyola—Powers of Imagining: A Philosophical Hermeneutic of Imagining through the Collected Works of Ignatius de Loyola with a Translation of these Works* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1986).

³ *Autobiography*, nn. 5-6, Exx 47 etc..

life in this believing pilgrim, and the believer lived with Christ. They had come to live with one another.

Pondering (meditatio)

However Ignatius did not merely read the pictures of Christ's life; he also weighed them up, or pondered them, to find their meaning. He used his understanding to analyse and reflect upon them, as if they were a text to be interpreted. It is not too fanciful, therefore, to use the term *meditation*, as used in the technical vocabulary of *lectio divina*, as a way of describing this phase. If we do so, we can see why Ignatius attached such importance to the use of the understanding as one of the soul's mental, spiritual powers.⁴

Praying (oratio)

This rational pondering, the *meditatio*, carried him one step further. Whenever Ignatius gained insight into the meaning of the divine text he was pondering, he was touched by an inner feeling. Through his imagining and pondering, he entered into contact with Christ and with God; and this contact did not leave him untouched. He wanted to come ever closer to this Christ and this God, and to serve Christ and God more effectively. This desire then expressed itself verbally; he spoke to God, 'as one friend speaks with another, or a servant with a master' (Exx 54): Ignatius tells God what is worrying him, what he desires, or what he wants to find out.

This speaking with God, this *oratio*, provoked movements within him. In these movements Ignatius recognized that God was speaking to him in a new way. God was speaking to Ignatius through signs he could perceive through his senses.⁵ God was trying to make clear what was the divine desire for the world, and for Ignatius' life in particular. God allowed Ignatius to feel how it was possible for him best to enter within the divine service. But, Ignatius noticed, it was not only God who was at work: the 'enemy of human nature' was also trying to move him interiorly, and to make choices for him. Therefore he had to be able to distinguish ('discern') between what was spoken or indicated by God, and what came from the enemy. What were the signs coming from the enemy in order only to mislead and entice? What were the signs that God was speaking? Ignatius now saw that he had to read and ponder not only the scenes from the life of Jesus in themselves, but also the signs and the mood swings that came to him.

⁴ For example, Exx 3, 50.

⁵ Exx 175, 330; *Diary*, 14 February, 15 February.

Understanding the divine picture-language meant understanding the divine sign-language. This is what was called the 'discernment of spirits'.

Such discernment of spirits was crucial for the making of a life-choice. Ignatius always avoided decisions that stemmed primarily from his own self-reliance and sense of self-sufficiency. His desire was to serve God even if that brought suffering; he wanted choices that were in accord with the will of God. For that it was essential to be 'indifferent', which meant being capable of overcoming personal preferences, desires and inclinations. Such an indifference has much in common with the self-emptying, the freedom from addiction, that so many in both the Western and the Eastern spiritual tradition prize so highly. Through becoming indifferent and detached, one opens up space for the other.

In the following of Christ, Ignatius learnt that such indifference and detachment related not simply to the daily means of living, but also to all his human and spiritual riches. He came to realize that he had been clinging on to signs, to visions, to outpourings of prayer, and to other emotional experiences. And all the while he had thought he was clinging to God. Now he saw that in all these images and signs his attention was self-obsessed. They were like mirrors, simply reflecting back himself. Such 'mirrors' were at most a means, used by God and Christ to deal with Ignatius; they were not, however, the God whom Ignatius was really seeking. Moreover, they also in large measure reflected Ignatius' own self. When Ignatius came to recognize that such images and signs were just signs of something else, he was able to free himself from them. In this way, then space was made for the really divine Other. Only then could Ignatius be purely present to Christ, the suffering servant of God (the Third Week of the Exercises). No longer did such images and signs reflect the self back; instead they became transparent as glass, radiant with the creative being of God. They became icons; now the reality they depicted shone through them, and they became transparent to another reality. As he became more present to Christ, the divine image, as he became more ready for service, more indifferent, more detached, Christ gradually ceased to be a mirror of Ignatius' own desires, and became instead an icon. No longer was he a mediator; Ignatius shared, rather, in Christ's immediacy to God. In Christ, Ignatius found the space for direct encounter with God.

Envisaging (contemplatio)

At this point, Ignatius had reached what the teachers of *lectio divina* called the phase of envisaging (*contemplatio*). We can recognize this phase as we read the notes in the *Spiritual Diary* that Ignatius jotted down as he sought to find the will of God with regard to his Society's *Constitutions*. During the final period covered by the *Diary*, Ignatius receives only the gift of tears; there are no visions or spontaneous flows of words or other graces of this kind.⁶ It is difficult and risky to say what these tears meant; opinions differ. But it is probable that in this period too Ignatius' relationship with God was going through a transition.

Ignatius was asking God to make clear to him the divine ideal for the Society. For months, this was the content of his prayer. His choice of a style of life in accord with the divine ideal brought him once again into conflict with a reality as yet far short of the ideal. Ignatius placed this discrepancy, one which he was also experiencing in his life with his companions, before God. But no clear reaction from God was felt: it was as if Ignatius found himself alone, left in the lurch. This caused a deep pain. Ignatius suffered at the contrast between the ideal and the real. He suffered from how what was divine seemed so unclear, so absent from lived reality. The suffering brought him to tears. Tears that were a sign of godforsakenness. Tears that were also a sign of Ignatius' self-emptying and utter dependence.

In the end, however, Ignatius moved beyond a stage in which tears were a sign. Ignatius must have realized that his tears were more than an indication of God's abandonment: they were rather a kind of *overflowing* of the relationship that had grown up between himself and God. This experience gave Ignatius an awareness of God's presence precisely at the moment that he experienced God as the Absent One. Now, Ignatius became detached even from the powerlessness that his tears had symbolized, and became receptive to the God who was truly there. At this climax of ascetic self-discipline, in this utter emptiness, the tears became an overflowing expression of Ignatius' meeting with the Present One. It was a mystical, un-mediated encounter, an encounter that gave life. The deepest detachment made space for a mystical union to take place.⁷ In the emptiness, God at once revealed God's own face and formed, in the divine image, the face of Ignatius,

⁶*Diary*, 8 April.

⁷*Translator's note*: The author here uses, to great effect, the special language developed by such medieval Dutch and Flemish mystics as Ruusbroec. No translation can hope to convey this.

the *homo mysticus*. In this encounter, Ignatius at once discovered God and also himself as the image of God.

Even here, images played a part, but in a distinctive, paradoxical way. Now that Ignatius had become detached from images, he could see how God creates by imaging. In the mystic, God self-images forth, forming the creature after the image of the Image-maker. God self-bestows as Creator, Re-creator, Image-maker. God's own creative imaging fills the emptiness. The revelation of God's will consisted in Ignatius' recognising God's face, and having his own will brought into harmony with God's.

God gave God's own self to Ignatius; conversely, Ignatius discovered his deepest self in his Lord, as an image of God. The image of God that he had always recognized was that of a Lord to be served—he had carried out that service faithfully. But it was different now. In the intimate mystical encounter, God was revealed as the Lord who *in person serves* Ignatius. The dynamic was being reversed, so that Ignatius could become a servant in the fullest and deepest sense. His servanthood was now an image of God's own service. The mystical encounter showed Ignatius in the most fundamental and intimate way what it meant to be a servant of the Lord. Moreover, at the heart of this deep, interior service of Ignatius, glory revealed itself. Servant and Lord were one; chooser and chosen were one. The will of God was the will of Ignatius, and vice versa. Now they both spoke one and the same language.

We can say, then, that emptiness and 'indifference' made creative space for God, the space for God's image-forming. In the emptiness, the relationship between God and the human person was born at the deepest level. This relationship—to use a classic Ignatian phrase—is life's principle and foundation.

Working Out (applicatio)

In the mystical encounter the relation between God and His servant had been greatly deepened, made inward. It continued to work itself out (*applicatio*) as Ignatius' spiritual way developed. Even more explicitly than before, this way was marked by a service of God and neighbour. Ignatius was contemplative in action. Ignatius' choice for God's service took shape in his service of others: other people, and indeed the whole of creation, were now a firm anchor-point for his dialogue with God, his service of God. Conversely, there was also a change in Ignatius' relationships with other people: he had become for them an image of God. In his service of his neighbour, he presented to them an image of God. Men and women now saw him as 'lord' and

'master' because of his complete dedication to service. He was for them a symbol, an icon of God. Through him, God could speak to people, and draw them into the offer of relationship. God was teaching them how to read and understand the Scriptures afresh (Luke 24:32). The images were a medium for divine language.

The Following of Christ

The way Ignatius was shown, the way he himself followed, was therefore a way leading through images of Christ's life. He must have realized that the space where God comes closest to the human is precisely in a human person. That person is Jesus, the Messiah, the Christ. He is, in the fullest way possible, "the image of the invisible God" (Colossians 1:15). He is the guide and the way between God and humanity (John 1:18). It was through Christ that Ignatius learned of how God had created him in God's own image. From his very beginning he was bound to God. Christ helped him to discover this relationship, to deepen it and to give it form; Ignatius took Christ into his life. Christ became for Ignatius the living signpost to the being of God. In the presence of Christ, Ignatius learned to become free of the need to live just within himself. He began to appropriate a deeper, more relational level of being. It was thanks to this formative process that Ignatius gained greater insight into the nature of his own uniqueness, and into his relationship with God. When he became perfectly detached and receptive, he had a revelation of himself as an image of his Maker and Lord. The perfect image of God, the servant Christ, is the Way through which, and within which, Ignatius came to be formed in his innermost depth as himself an image of God. Through this imaging forth, the relationship between the servant Ignatius and the Lord God came to birth in its most authentic form.

If we look at Ignatius' spiritual path in this way, we can see that the imagination has a quite special significance in it. Firstly, imagination is the spiritual capacity through which Ignatius first came to know Christ and God. The images became the *object* that he could 'read' and 'ponder'. But the process of creating images, the 'imaging', was in the end also an *activity*. This activity depended not only on Ignatius, but also on God. By imaging-forth in creation, God is forming and transforming everything into God's own image and likeness. Images open up a path for human spiritual formation and transformation in God. The *Spiritual Exercises* point out this way of divine image-making; they embody a promise that the road can be travelled; they bear witness that this image-making has really happened.

Image and Choice: Two Sides of the Same Coin

The imagination, as we have seen, is a characteristic feature of Ignatian spirituality. But how does this relate to the choice, the 'Election', which is also a distinctive feature of Ignatian spirituality? The answer is that each makes the other possible. The human process of getting to know about Jesus through images and growing closer to him brings with it a choice to want to learn about God. Without this initial, continuing 'yes', the imagination cannot serve as a means of spiritual formation. Then further work with images gives pilgrims the space they need to grow towards the fundamental choice: that of allowing themselves to be chosen for God's service.

In God's activity, too, choice and image seem equally inseparable. God must have had the choice whether or not to become involved with humanity. God made the choice for involvement and relationship, a choice which expressed itself in the creation of human beings. Moreover, God's choice has taken specific form: the human has been made in the divine image and likeness. God's choice for humanity and God's imaging of humanity are thus two sides of the same coin. God is constantly inviting humanity into a relationship, and a person's acceptance involves both choice and image. Ignatius modelled such a relationship in the close following of Jesus Christ, in whom divine and human choice, divine and human image, came together perfectly.

Conclusion

The venerable school of *lectio divina* has helped us understand how Ignatius used images along his spiritual way. In him, activity and passivity, asceticism and mysticism, were intimately connected. Ignatius' imaginative activity led him to a profoundly mystical state. In interreligious dialogue between Buddhism and Christianity, he does, therefore, deserve a place. He offers us insights too often overlooked or neglected in approaches to dialogue centred on 'negative' spirituality. Ignatius might also lead us to explore other traditions of 'positive' spirituality. Our dialogue must listen to voices from a wide range of traditions, both 'positive' and 'negative'. Only then will it give us real insight into the dynamic relationships between God and humanity that develop as we move forward along the spiritual road.

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