

POSTMODERN SPIRITUALITY AND THE IGNATIAN FUNDAMENTUM

Tim Muldoon

SHORTLY AFTER THE SECOND VATICAN COUNCIL, the Jesuit theologian Karl Rahner suggested that the Church was entering a third major phase in its history. It had begun as a sect within Judaism, but Paul's mission to the Gentiles had inaugurated a process that led to Christianity becoming a shaping force for European culture, and later for its colonial offshoots. But now, with Vatican II, it was becoming for the first time a truly global reality.¹

We can set this idea against Samuel P. Huntington's account of how democracy has grown in the world in three waves. The first wave followed the American and French Revolutions; the second followed World War II; and the third involves mainly Catholic countries in Central and South America, East Asia, and Central and Eastern Europe.² In short, both ecclesial Christianity and political democracy are becoming global realities.

What do these movements have to do with Christian spirituality? A great deal. For if spirituality is the lived practice of faith in the concrete, everyday experiences of our lives, then culture has an important impact on spirituality. For example, we who live according to a belief in a Church that is 'one, holy, catholic, and apostolic' must exercise a certain measure of imagination in cultures which are immersed in postmodernity. Unlike those whose world-views were limited to the towns or villages near their places of birth, we today look

¹ Karl Rahner, 'Basic Theological Interpretation of Vatican II' (1979), in *Theological Investigations*, volume 20, translated by Edward Quinn (London: Darton, Longman and Todd, 1981), 77-89, especially 83. Rahner's focus was on the Catholic Church gathered at the Council; for the purposes of this article, however, I will refer to the term 'Church' in the more abstract sense of those who profess faith in Jesus Christ.

² Samuel Huntington, *The Third Wave: Democratization in the Late Twentieth Century* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1991).

out at a world that is amazingly diverse. Our awareness of 'otherness' has multiplied because of our immediate access to knowledge of people and places very different from home. In such a world, the Church can scarcely be described as 'one', and the claim to catholicity is, at best, ambiguous.

In the postmodern, global context, the practice of Christian faith is a deliberative choice of a kind quite different from anything faced by earlier generations. The phenomenon of globalisation confronts us with the realities that Christian faith is certainly not the only religious option available to us, and that Christians constitute only a minority of the world's population. These realities, moreover, raise deep questions about Christology, soteriology, worship, morality, ecclesiology, and a host of other issues. The ways in which we answer these questions will certainly have an impact on our spirituality.

**Christian faith
is not the only
religious option
available to us**

Another decisive influence on how Christian faith is practised in the postmodern era comes from the global spread of democracy. At the root of the democratic ideal is a kind of faith that all human beings, being created equal, ought to have a share in the structures of power that govern the community.³ As early as the 1820s, the Frenchman Alexis de Tocqueville observed that what was unique in the sensibility of the United States was the manner in which democracy persuaded the people of their individual worth. Unlike their forebears in different parts of Europe, these US Americans rejected hierarchical social systems, preferring to see themselves as equals and thus equally capable of judging what constituted a good society.⁴ The spread of democracy in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries represented a kind of gospel in itself, a way of rendering claims about the means to salvation. Democracy persuades people that they are capable of judging for themselves what is ultimately true or false. Democracy exalts individuals by persuading them that they can discern the nature

³ Compare the language of the 1948 United Nations Universal Declaration of Human Rights: 'the peoples of the United Nations have in the Charter reaffirmed their faith in fundamental human rights, in the dignity and worth of the human person and in the equal rights of men and women ...'. While the document does not explicitly endorse democracy *per se*, it is clearly influenced by Western models of government. (Online at <http://www.un.org/Overview/rights.html>)

⁴ Alexis de Tocqueville, *Democracy in America* (1831), online at the University of Virginia's website, http://xroads.virginia.edu/~HYPER/DETOC/toc_idx.html.

of reality through the intelligent application of the faculty of conscience.

The dual movements of globalisation and democratization have had profound effects on our perception of truth. Awareness of global diversity leads many to question the very possibility of universal truth. Cultural relativism is the belief that the very existence of a plurality of world-views means that there are no criteria by which to judge one against another. Minimally, awareness of pluralism should make us conscious of the fragility of human understanding. According to a Nigerian proverb, where one thing stands, another thing stands beside it. My way of thinking cannot be considered the only way of thinking, and so responsible intelligence demands that we discern together which way of thinking is most authentic.

Democratization also exalts the individual conscience. There are both positive and negative dimensions to this privileging of the individual. Positively, it demands that individuals appropriate for themselves the means by which to make reasoned judgments. In the area of religion, this means that the individual can no longer rely on the community or the cleric for faith: the individual must come to the act of faith through personal initiative, personal response to the invitation of God. Postmodernity, in this perspective, presents Christians with an opportunity for growth, an opportunity to look into the meanings of accepted doctrines in order to discover anew the ways in which God invites people to intimacy. The negative dimension, however, is that democratization can persuade the individual that faith is a private enterprise. And where faith becomes privatised, it becomes a consumer commodity, governed by economics. A democratized faith can, in the extreme case, become an attempt to answer the question, 'what's in it for me?'

The Church is witnessing the effects of globalisation and democratization on its youngest members. Young adults in the West have grown up in a world where these two forces have been formative. To cite one example, studies in the United States demonstrate that young adults are more influenced by popular culture—ruled by a consumerism which is in many ways the result of democratization—than by Christian tradition. They are more likely than older people to regard different world religions as equally valid; they are unlikely to consider the influence of religious leaders as the most meaningful in their lives; they are less likely than older generations to attend formal



© Paul Mulner

worship regularly; they are likely to see religious affiliation as an option rather than as a duty.⁵

Those formed at the end of the Cold War understand democracy as salvation from communism, economics as the primary hermeneutical lens with which to understand the world, pluralism as the postmodern equivalent of religious tolerance, and religion as a personal choice to help people get in touch with themselves. Choosing to be a Christian is not unlike choosing a political party. It arises out of the democratic ideal of self-development; it has something to say about the good community; and it is fine as long as one does not violate the only moral absolute in a pluralist world: do not judge others. Young people in the Western world have been raised in a culture which sees religion as another product to consume.⁶ Further, they have been led to believe that the customer is always right.

⁵ Two recent studies include Dean R. Hoge and others, *Young Adult Catholics: Religion in the Culture of Choice* (Notre Dame, In: University of Notre Dame Press, 2001), and James D. Davidson and others, *The Search for Common Ground: What Unites and Divides Catholic Americans* (Huntington, In: Our Sunday Visitor Books, 1997).

⁶ Vincent J. Miller explores the impact of consumer culture on religion in *Consuming Religion: Christian Faith and Practice in Consumer Culture* (New York: Continuum, 2003).

The market for spirituality over the last decade has boomed, driven by the generation born after the Second World War who are now reaching late-middle age. A cursory glance at those authors, both Christian and non-Christian, who have written on spirituality in recent years reveals that the majority grew up during the turbulent decades following the war. The culture which formed their world-views was rapidly changing; structures of authority were collapsing in ways that made many question whether anything in society was constant. For Roman Catholics, especially, the Second Vatican Council represented the changing of the unchangeable. The Church, which had remained the same for as long as anyone could remember (for some 400 years since the Council of Trent, for those who knew their church history), was undergoing massive, visible changes: masses were said in the vernacular; scores of clergy and religious were moving into lay life; and an emphasis on the Church as the people of God was replacing the notion of a privileged, clerical elite. This generation began to see Christian faith as a personal commitment more than as a cultural inevitability; and they were perhaps the first to speak their minds on a grand scale about what constituted the authentic practice of faith. The theological and moral debates that followed the Council, especially those in response to the watershed encyclical *Humanae vitae*, were the result of a community coming into critical awareness of its own responsibility for appropriating the meaning of Christianity on a personal level. In this respect, Catholics were beginning to catch up with their Protestant brothers and sisters in understanding faith as a personal commitment to following Jesus. Matters religious were profoundly political; having been given the responsibility of discerning what the demands of faith were, Christians across the ideological spectrum accepted the corresponding responsibility of contributing to public debate about authentic Christian spirituality.

Over the last decades, many lay people have developed greater ownership of their faith and their Church. They have developed the kind of understanding of spiritual growth once reserved for clerics—an understanding that God calls all Christians to spiritual maturity through the process of lived reflection on the implications and demands of faith. This development contrasts with the facile image of the lay person as someone who is to be passively obedient to Church

authorities, an understanding which prevailed in Catholic magisterial documents in the period between Vatican I and Vatican II.⁷

There is, however, a more negative side to this growth. An important element in the maturation of many adults in the Church today has involved critical reflection on the expressions of faith—liturgy, morality, spirituality—such that many see the practice of critical reflection as itself constitutive of faith. What is overlooked, however, is that authentic criticism can take place only when there is something to criticize: one can come to critical awareness of one's faith only if one has a faith in the first place. The younger generations of the Church have grown up in an ecclesial context where criticism is the rule. Their parents (in many cases) are adults who have come to think critically about their own faith, and who wanted their children also to develop critical thinking in matters religious. Very often, their teaching took the form of a negative understanding of religious faith: 'I don't force my children to go to church, because I want them to decide for themselves'. Criticism—an intellectual exercise undertaken by free people in a democratic society as they expressed their ability to think for themselves—often preceded or even replaced faith formation. Young people were taught to be critical consumers of information and thoughtful purveyors of religious truth, not merely passive *tabulae rasae* upon which religious authorities could impress sectarian doctrine. What they were not taught, however, was the joy in (I do not use the expression 'reason for') making the act of faith in God revealed in Jesus Christ.

**Authentic
criticism takes
place only
when there
is something
to criticize**

The effect of this formative period on many young people has been to give them the ability to think critically about religious truth-claims in a postmodern world. My students are comfortable judging certain doctrines acceptable and others not so—regardless of whether the doctrines arise out of Christian or other traditions. They are consumers of religious truth—fascinated by it, in many cases, and content to determine the pragmatic value of various truth-claims. They can navigate ambiguity. Though they are sometimes naïve, they know that religious commitment should be balanced against the more

⁷ Paul Lakeland explores the development of the understanding of the lay person in this period in his book *The Liberation of the Laity: In Search of an Accountable Church* (New York and London: Continuum, 2003).

fundamental ethic of respect for all religions. To many, spiritual growth is the unfolding of the self; it is a kind of discipline by which one grows into an ethical person. Their soteriology is thoroughly pluralistic: my faith saves me; your faith saves you. It all depends on which God you believe in.

Yet what these students often lack is a true understanding of why faith matters. They may be persuaded of its worth in civil society as a code of ethics—which they value, since they are schooled in the historical examples of those, such as Nazi doctors or Stalinist government workers, who were rational but not ethical. They may recognise its importance in the ordering of society. They may be drawn to its language of mystery, particularly around liminal issues such as love, death and suffering. They may appreciate how human history testifies to the archetypal drive for religious meaning, and how Christianity highlights the fundamental cycles of life, death and rebirth. They can see religious faith as a kind of commitment to live deeply the search for meaning in a fractured world. All these perspectives are valuable, and may be what Justin Martyr referred to as the ‘seeds of faith’, inasmuch as they suggest to young people that faith is important. But what is so utterly foreign to many is the experience of falling in love with God. Religion, for them, is an intellectual exercise rooted in the individual conscience, rather than a response to a God who holds out a hand to say, ‘let’s have an adventure!’

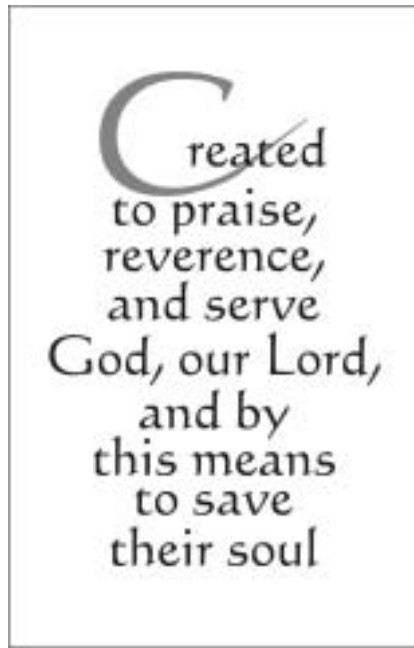
At the same time, though, young adults immersed in the postmodern, post-rational, post-hegemonic, post-colonial world have begun to recognise an element in their personal lives which challenges socially defined conceptual categories. They feel a hunger for spirituality, a hunger which leaks out of their art, their casual conversations, their experiences of love and suffering. They have recognised that something in their experience leads them to seek transcendence, even as they frequently criticize the Church for being an organization which seems actively to hide it. Their turn to find spiritual meaning in places other than the Church ought not to dissuade us from asking what resources in our tradition address their fundamental hunger. In my experience, one of the most provocative comes from the tradition of Ignatian spirituality.

The Ignatian Fundamentum

Saint Ignatius of Loyola's sixteenth-century *Spiritual Exercises* begins with what he calls the 'First Principle and Foundation'. This is a deceptively simple statement of what one must embrace in order to progress spiritually, and it offers us a provocative point of departure for considering what authentic Christian spirituality might look like in the postmodern era. Ignatius suggests that we are created to praise, reverence and serve God our Lord, and by these means to achieve our eternal well-being. This observation rests upon an understanding of what constitutes the spiritual life, namely, the pervasive practice of responding to an ever-present God. In referring to this understanding, I follow the usage of Joseph A. Tetlow of the Latin term *fundamentum* rather than the English 'foundation'.⁸ This Latin term, which is found in all the Latin sixteenth-century directories of Ignatius' *Spiritual Exercises*, connotes God's intimate involvement in the whole of a person's life. Too often, the 'Principle and Foundation' is thought of as just one element in Ignatius' programme, as step one in Ignatian prayer. The truth is that the *fundamentum* more properly refers to the very objective of the entire spiritual life.

Ignatius' text then develops his basic thesis: everything on earth is to help people in working toward the end for which they were created; we should use things only in so far as they help us to achieve that end; we must be indifferent to everything as long as we are fixed on that end; we ought to desire only that end. What emerges from a cursory reading of the Principle and Foundation is a blueprint for moral and spiritual growth—an almost instrumental understanding of a human being as a creature 'for' some greater purpose which God determines. I am reminded of Thérèse of Lisieux, who likened herself to a plaything in the hands of the child Jesus, or of Teresa of Calcutta, who spoke of herself as 'God's pencil'. Ignatius proposes that we exercise our faculty of imagination in order to envision what it might be like to be an instrument of God, designed for something beautiful.

⁸ Joseph A. Tetlow, 'The *Fundamentum*: Creation in the Principle and Foundation', *Studies in the Spirituality of Jesuits*, 21/4 (September 1989), 1-53. Compare Gilles Cusson, *Biblical Theology and the Spiritual Exercises*, translated by Mary Angela Roudit and George E. Ganss, edited by George E. Ganss (St Louis: Institute of Jesuit Sources, 1987 [1968]).



My interest here is in how Ignatius gets us thinking about ourselves in an entirely fresh way. While the language he uses is certainly familiar to traditional Catholics, its disarming simplicity also invites today's postmoderns to explore issues about humanity and God within a Christian frame of reference. My thesis is this: Ignatian spirituality speaks to postmoderns because it is based on a personal, imaginative exploration of the gospel, and it invites people to choose freely to deepen their intimacy with God through a deepened understanding of who they themselves are. The invitation

to come to know God in this way is radically different from the approach which has become familiar to so many: that of learning the doctrines and moral teachings of the Church in religious education, and developing the critical thinking that sometimes leads us to question whether any doctrine can be judged true. Ignatian spirituality is not primarily doctrinal, because it is not primarily an exercise of reason. It is instead a practice of imagination, with all the affective dimensions that unfold in imagination, often without the explicit consent of the intellect. I wish to focus on three themes which comprise the Ignatian *fundamentum*—three themes which, when appropriated by the seeking person, lead one to spiritual growth through intimate encounter with God. These themes are imaginative play, fundamental receptivity, and self-transcending love.

Imaginative Play

For those immersed in a thoroughly pluralist world, any spiritual practice that is predicated on obedience to doctrinal claims is unlikely to be persuasive. To put it a different way, traditional devotions such as the rosary, Eucharistic adoration, mass attendance on first Fridays, and even Bible study may be perceived as exclusive. The conventional

wisdom for many religious educators over the years has been that a community must share its practices and beliefs with the young, in order that they might come to assume adult roles in the community. But in a thoroughly pluralist world, young adults achieve a measure of critical consciousness that very often leads them to question the relevance of the beliefs and practices of their faith community. Many wonder why they should spend the time and energy going to church when they are not certain that what it offers is right.

Ignatian spirituality offers a ‘user-friendly’ way into the life of prayer which appeals to the uncertain. The basic counsel is simple: imagine what it would be like if God were creating you every moment of your life. Ignatius’ First Principle and Foundation has been read (mistakenly) as a doctrinal claim which one must accept in order to undertake the Spiritual Exercises. What I propose, instead, is that the Principle and Foundation is an invitation to imaginative play. What, it asks, might it be like if God took the time and care to create my entire life, moment by moment, in order that my acceptance of this creation—and my participation in it—might reflect beauty, as a work of art reflects the creativity of an artist? What might it be like if God were a person who invests in my very being, and places me in a world where I can use everything to achieve perfection?

The postmodern person who is wary of arrogant claims to authority and truth can, in good conscience, accept an invitation to exercise imagination. Whereas the more traditional models of mission often assumed the superiority of Christian doctrine, the invitation to imaginative play makes no such claims. Instead, it proposes that the language and conceptual apparatus of Christian tradition can provide a story through which to explore the relationship between God and a person on an individual level. It might be objected that such a dynamic falls prey to the individualism that ignores the corporate dimensions of Christian spirituality. But this imaginative play is merely a method, not the goal of the Spiritual Exercises. The method is merely the medium through which one eventually comes to consider the meaning of the relationship between God and humanity.

Fundamental Receptivity

Moral theologians in the latter half of the twentieth century began speaking of a ‘fundamental option’, of a person’s basic decision to

choose God's will. They contrasted the fundamental option with specific moral choices—some of which were sinful—in order to argue that individual sins need not represent a decision to end one's relationship with God.⁹

***A formative
process that
knits God
and the
person in
ever-deepening
relationship***

I prefer to speak of 'fundamental receptivity' as a goal of Ignatian spirituality. Whereas the term 'option' suggests a kind of primordial act of conscience, the term 'receptivity' more adequately renders what a person constantly practises in the process of living the spiritual life. The Ignatian *fundamentum* is not a once-and-for-all decision, but rather a formative process that knits God and the human person in an ever-deepening relationship. A person who practises imaginative play around the theme of God's creation of the self has already assented, on some level, to the invitation to know God. As that person continues to imagine related themes, using biblical stories and religious symbols, the person continues to explore the ways in which the imagination proposes matters for thought or feeling.

Imagining the stories of saints led Ignatius himself to discern more and more clearly how attracted he was to the idea of doing something great for God. Imagination allowed him to explore the meaning of saints' lives, and thus to become aware of feelings and thoughts which he had not previously considered. Further, he came to enjoy those feelings and thoughts, so that eventually he was able to name what he was experiencing: a desire to serve God in the context of the Church. Ignatian spirituality gently proposes that a person explore the feelings and thoughts which arise spontaneously while imagining God's relationship to the self. What is especially attractive about this proposal is the fact that it is the individual who generates the feelings and thoughts. Over time, the practice can lead a person to greater and greater receptivity to knowing and serving God.

⁹ See, for example, Karl Rahner's theory of fundamental option in 'Some Thoughts on a Good Intention' (1955), *Theological Investigations*, volume 3, translated by Karl-H. Kruger (Baltimore: Helicon Press, 1966). Compare Pope John Paul II's more critical account in the encyclical *Veritatis splendor*, nn. 65 and 66.

Self-Transcending Love

The goal of Ignatian spirituality is a self-transcending love of God and of the other. If a person is given the freedom to explore God's relationship to the self—in the Examen especially—the response is gratitude. Authentic receptivity to God involves receiving love that enables one in turn to love others. For many the attraction to the practice of spirituality will originate in a desire for self-development. But over time they will discover a truth that Jesus taught: one must lose one's life in order to find it. There is something intuitive about love, justice, service to others—something which cannot be denied by people of good will, whether religious or not. Ignatian spirituality leads a person to deeper appreciation of God's love, and by extension to the expression of love in acts of solidarity, justice and mercy. Its necessarily social orientation represents a conscientious response to the evils of the world which avoids any temptation to use power. Ignatian spirituality is not a 'revolution' in the sense of a social movement; such movements have often eventually used power unjustly in seeking to overturn unjust uses of power. Rather, it is an invitation to change society by becoming a changed person within society. For the postmodern person, wary of the frequently murky ways in which power has been exercised, authentic spirituality involves a critical social awareness.

If the practice of Ignatian spirituality leads a person to a deeper knowledge of God, then it is about enabling a person to develop a firm *fundamentum*—the rock upon which Jesus proposes that the wise person build a house. In an era when the very notion of certain knowledge is suspect, this tradition offers a challenge: do not think of *knowing about God* as an exercise of reason, with all the difficulties that that entails. Think instead of coming to *know God* through greater knowledge of oneself. In doing so, one comes to recognise that at the very *fundamentum* of one's lived existence is a loving creator, working with each person to co-create their daily life.

Postmodernity and the Fundamentum

In the postmodern age, the objective of those who undertake the Spiritual Exercises—and indeed, of those who wish to practise authentic Christian spirituality—is an ownership of the *fundamentum*. Far from being an introductory exercise or a passing comment, the

fundamentum represents what St Paul calls ‘the mind of Christ’, and is thus what every Christian ought to strive for.¹⁰ It is interesting to note that Paul’s instruction to the Corinthians—who were themselves in the midst of debates over authority in the first century—addressed how those who were ‘infants in Christ’ might progress to spiritual maturity. Their situation, and Paul’s counsel, have a message for us in the twenty-first century.

If postmodernity involves questions about the possibility of religious authority, it is no surprise that there has arisen in recent decades an interest in religious ‘experience’. For, in the absence of trust, people must rely on their own faculties. In response to the Corinthians’ squabbles over whom to believe, Paul underscores that it is ultimately God alone who is the author of spiritual growth (1 Corinthians 3:7). The *fundamentum* can be seen as an attentiveness to the God who is constantly working with us to co-create our lives—a kind of *lectio divina* in which the text is our own experience, but which we read through the lens of sacred scripture. For young people who trust only their own experience, it is important that we suggest to them that Ignatian spirituality offers a new way to discover the God who has been present with them throughout their lives.

Tim Muldoon is the author of *The Ignatian Workout: Daily Spiritual Exercises for a Healthy Faith* (Chicago: Loyola Press, 2004) and *Come to the Banquet: Nourishing Our Spiritual Hunger* (Franklin, Wi: Sheed and Ward, 2002). He serves as Chair of the Department of Religious Studies, Philosophy, and Theology at Mount Aloysius College in Cresson, Pennsylvania.

¹⁰ In 1 Corinthians 2-3, Paul is instructing Christians about what distinguishes the spiritual person from the unspiritual person, indicating that the former has ‘the mind of Christ’.