

WHAT MIGHT ST IGNATIUS SAY ABOUT UNBELIEF TODAY?

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There is no evidence that St Ignatius ever met an atheist. The nearest parallel might be his encounter with a Moslem on the road to Montserrat. According to the *Autobiography*, Ignatius was so disturbed by this man's doubting the perpetual virginity of Mary that he felt it his duty to stab him. Being at a relatively crude stage in his sense of discernment, he left it to the donkey whether or not to follow the culprit, and the donkey thankfully took the path of non-violence.

However as the spiritual adventure of Ignatius of Loyola progressed through surprising changes of plan, he found himself on the road to Rome, to the foundation of an order, and then involved in a worldwide mission that confronted the particular unbelief of his age. He gradually found his pastoral horizon widening. He found himself faced with a world where the language of faith was in deep crisis because of so many changes in the surrounding world. Just as today, it was not so much faith itself, in its credal content, that was in trouble, but the ways in which it was lived and expressed.

In the early sixteenth century that crisis had at least two fronts. In the church itself there was a dangerous gap between gospel vision and pastoral realities: hence the crucial need was for a non-divisive reform of church life. Besides, the cultural geography was dramatically expanding - within Europe with the excitements of the Renaissance and beyond Europe with the discovery of new continents. To confront this brave new world needed a different spirit of mission, and before the end of his life Ignatius would have concerns that stretched from India to Brazil.

Comparing the Centuries

Even though there are parallels with our radically changing culture, Ignatius would have no idea of the complexity of our modern scene with its many faces of atheism. In many places the absence of God is now more an unquestioned assumption than a rebellion. It is an attitude that dominates sectors of intellectual and cultural life, even in Ireland. Here as elsewhere the tone has shifted significantly from a militancy of rejection to - at least for

some people - a post-modern distance from the very possibility of religious faith. Ignatius would surely find this hard to fathom. Nevertheless I propose to hold the *Spiritual Exercises*, like a Geiger counter, over the various atheisms of today and in this way to imagine what St Ignatius might say.

Part I: Skills of Wonder

"Every way of preparing and disposing for freedom" (§ 1). "Consider with great care the condition of each individual" (§ 14). "What fills and satisfied is intimate understanding and savouring the truth" (§ 2). "I call consolation every increase of faith ... and all inner joy that calls and attracts" (§ 316).

Starting from these phrases in the *Spiritual Exercises*, it is remarkable to find such an emphasis on disposition and on adapting the spiritual journey to the particular temperament and situation of the person. In modern terms St Ignatius seems to have favoured a slow stage of pre-evangelization. Faced with our world of confused religious images, I think he would identify the basic faith problem as one of spiritual freedom rather than of pure truth. Today the culture that surrounds people often stifles the very starting point for faith. In so far as people are not free to hear, then the first pastoral need is a liberation of levels of listening. In other words faith today often comes into focus only after some ministry of disposition - some way of helping individuals and groups to move from cramped living into that hearing from which faith can be born.

Faced with the faith crisis of his own day, the response of Ignatius was to offer people a way of spiritual liberation through personal prayer experience. He assumed, without too much theorizing about it, that the best road to truth was experiential, and that when religious truth could become real in prayer, there would be no major problem on the level of mind. Translated into more contemporary language, his approach was something like this: if you want to help someone to find God, you first offer them the space to touch their own wonder, and to do that you need to provide ways of escaping from trivial self-listening. Today this would apply in a special way to the many young people marginalized from the inherited religion of their parents. If they encounter only the rind of religious externals and not the core agenda of faith, it is not surprising that they stay at a distance. Their first step has to be a deeper contact and invitation, and what will later be called a liberation of desire.

Awakening Religious Sense

The biography of Ignatius furnishes ample evidence that he had a special gift with individuals and spent much time in "spiritual conversation" with people. It is surely wrong to imagine that in those meetings he engaged in preaching or exhortation of a condescending kind. All the evidence suggests that he had a gift for reaching people and awakening them to their hungers. Ignatius the courtier (and it needs repeating he was more courtier than soldier) was a conversationalist *par excellence*, and one, I think, who could gently lead people towards glimpsing their own mystery of goodness before opening them to the mystery of God. He was a conversationalist of conversion. Not for nothing will we find his analogy for prayer drawn from how a friend speaks to a friend.

Turning again to our modern situation, it has been said that where previous generations repressed sexuality, today it is spirituality that is left undernourished. In so far as people are wonder-starved, they lack the bridge from experience to faith and mystery. The religious sense is neglected. A gulf opens between the usual languages of religion and the unawoken depths in everyone. It is sadly rare that people find religion touching their imagination. Instead they find the gospel reduced to rituals or to ethics. As Sebastian Moore has commented, the ineffectiveness of religion today is due to this failure to reach people's "pre-religious God awareness". Similarly Karl Rahner called for a new "mystagogy", which would take as its pastoral starting point "a person's self experience" at its deepest.

Part II: Recognizing the Struggles

"To see the face of the earth in such great diversity" (§ 106). "To feel and understand the disorder ... and have a knowledge of the world" (§ 63). "Restlessness rising from many disturbances which lead to want of faith" (§ 317). "I desire a knowledge of the deceits of the rebel chief and help to guard myself against them" (§ 139).

It seems typical of the Ignatian missionary thrust to look first at the "diversity" of needs, and then to seek out the more universal language of serving faith. Applying this to our modern situation, a reverent listening to our moment in religious history is crucial. It will involve understanding the many changes that have marked our century, including those that seem to be transforming the face of Europe during these last few years. More specifically it means identifying the tone of non-belief in contemporary culture.

It may help to focus the diversity of modern atheisms by suggesting that they fall into at least four main families. A first and most frequent form is an atheism of apathy or indifference. By this is meant that in today's world many people fall victim to the prevailing culture, lack the freedom to resist the tides, and end up in a vague limbo of unquestioning where faith remains distant and unreal. As somebody has put it pithily, they may be touched by the water of baptism but untouched by the call of the gospels.

A second and slightly different version of this passive unbelief can be called an atheism of religious disappointment. These are people who have had some contact with church formation in earlier years but who - as in the parable of the Sower - have weak roots and their faith withers. Their situation has to be recognized as at least in part the outcome of a failure of pastoral imagination by church people.

Both of these forms of unbelief would have had their parallels in the period of St Ignatius. The third kind however is more specifically modern and involves an intellectual rejection of the notion of God. Even though its more aggressive tones have become out of date, this dismissal of faith in the world of ideas has had wide repercussions, and has placed faith on the defensive in modern culture.

Our fourth face to atheism is in fact the deepest version of rejection of God. It is the denial of God in practice rather than in mere theory. It is the biblical atheism of a refusal to live with love. It is the atheism of the hard and closed heart. It is the worship of idols of many kinds, and at the heart of idolatry is the perennial temptation to seek a more manageable and less mysterious god. In short this is an atheism of the heart's options rather than of the mind's interpretations, and as such, Karl Rahner describes it as "*fundamental sin*".

When Gabriel García Márquez won the Nobel prize for literature, his eloquent acceptance speech reminded us that each year more babies die in Latin America than are born in Western Europe. Atheism has not only a personal but a social dimension. It is important to recognize the injustice that ravages the Third World as another face of unbelief.

Resisting Cultural Desolation

Returning to the terms of Ignatius, it seems a crucial step towards understanding our situation to be able to name the "diversity" and "disorder" of unbelief today, and then to seek to probe those "disturbances which lead to want of faith". Going further and adapting Ignatian language, one can view our current scene of unbelief in terms of cultural desolation. Everyone is now aware of the dramatic decline in militant atheism (even though we should not

forget the huge world of China). But the very demise of marxism highlights how more subtle and more entrenched is the alternative atheistic ideology - the egoist liberalism that dominates the so-called First World and in Ignatian terms needs to be recognized as belonging to the "rebel chief". Therefore it is possible to borrow from the *Spiritual Exercises* and offer a "Two Standards" reading of this cultural and pastoral situation.

That celebrated meditation offers a metaphor of conflict - between false and true images of life. As our quotation from § 139 suggests, it encourages a clear-sighted awareness of the possible deceptions in our path. We need to be alert to what is false before being able to embrace what is true. In scriptural terms it is akin to the parable of the king going to war and needing to know the strength of the opposing forces (Luke 14:31). In other words we need to develop skills of Christian critique and of seeing through the deceptions of the surrounding culture.

To be a Christian today is to join the resistance to the diminished life on offer in the dominant images around. But let me add a note of caution here concerning tone. Too often we can fall into mere moaning about "isms" or a general lamenting over the modern world - and this seems pastorally unproductive. In Ignatian terms our naming of desolation must go hand in hand with a confidence that consolation is the deeper human call.

The first ministry towards unbelievers is one of disposition, the second one; is one of discernment. At its simplest, discernment is a skill of recognizing what is from God by realizing where it is leading. If faith in today's climate needs more and more to be rooted in a decision, according to Ignatius a good decision will only be made after discernment and grounded in consolation. Applied to the pastoral scene, this approach would stress the need for cultural analysis and spiritual formation: a lucid identifying of difficulties can prepare people for a decision of faith by showing them where they need to become less trapped and more free.

Part III: Pillars of Faith

"An intimate knowledge of our Lord" (§ 104). "A conversation exactly as one friend speaks to another" (§ 53). "Much talk about faith [can cause] people to become lazy in good works" (§ 368). "Love in deeds rather than in words" (§ 230).

In a time of faith crisis, it is important to focus on essentials. In his own age St Ignatius concentrated on the battle of spiritual freedom that underlies the struggle for faith. He did not compose a new summary of

doctrine. Instead he rediscovered a way of helping people to encounter the person of Christ.

The journalist John Waters has perceptively remarked that there is much talk about religion in Ireland but practically no mention of God. He could have gone further and said that although some people argue about the existence of God, it is extremely rare to find any mention of the person of Jesus Christ. There is a shyness or a silence about essentials and meanwhile, as recent surveys have shown, people become disappointed with the surface of church life. A new unbelief is often born from a surfeit of the secondaries of religion and a corresponding dearth of the liberating essentials of gospel faith.

The secondaries of religion take over whenever the following are what people *perceive* or *experience* as the priorities of religion: obligations without conversion of heart; doctrines without prayer formation; moral restrictions without a personal sense of Christ; and institutional concerns without a sense of the mystery of God. If the first four dominate, they can become a formula for religious alienation - especially within modern culture. But the second four are a quick summary of the *Spiritual Exercises* of Ignatius: taken in any order, their focus is on an experience of prayer that leads to a conversion to Christ. This is the weapon he shaped to combat the crisis of faith of his day. It is still a crucial way of renewing people's faith and of responding pastorally to situations of unbelief.

Deprived of Liberating Vision

How would Ignatius understand unbelief? His *Exercises* begin and end on a note of fullness. He asked what we are made for and eventually he saw us as sharing in the flow of God's love. Thus, unbelief would be an eclipse of that fullness for which we are created. In today's world Ignatius would not view unbelief as just a theoretical denial of a distant truth about a distant God: it is more than a rejection of deism or even of theism. Rather it would be a rejection of who we are as human beings. It would be a deprivation of the liberating vision that is Christian truth.

More particularly - Ignatius might say - unbelief is a shrinking of human desire through a replacing of ends with means. Not to know God can narrow the human agenda to the arrogance of me and the idolatry of here and now. If this happens, people stay in the prison-house of the present and of the visible, whereas they are made for so much more. In this light, the evil of unbelief lies in the stunting of desire, in a resignation and narrowing of the heart's horizons.

Ultimately for Ignatius it is deeply unnatural not to know the love that surrounds and invites us in Christ. One of his pastoral and spiritual assumptions is that consolation is the normal state for a Christian. This implies that when the river of God's love flows through our humanity, we can expect to know the Spirit's presence by its fruits. If our lives echo the Beatitudes, with their erosion of ego and their commitment to the heart of Christ, there will be a promised daily if undramatic presence of consolation - as a by-product of trying to live in Christ's spirit.

If the flow of faith brings consolation, unbelief for Ignatius can be guaranteed to bring desolation. Unbelief in his vision would rob the heart of its natural range of desire for more, for the *magis*. Nevertheless Ignatius was a great realist about the struggles. The Beatitude vision can easily become blocked, either in individuals or in cultures and communities. If blockages happen, they can also be unblocked - with prayer and care. That is the agenda of his *Exercises* - to free people from what blocks them from God.

Faith Growth in Practice

One of the hallmarks of St Ignatius is to be uneloquent and down-to-earth in his spiritual practicality. From the few phrases cited at the beginning of this section, we can construct a possible Ignatian way of helping people to rediscover faith or to exit from unbelief and from half-belief. At its simplest there are three principal pillars of faith growth. They are as old as the Acts of the Apostles and as new as the picture of alive faith emerging from many communities in the Church today. The three pillars, suggested by those citations from the *Exercises*, can be listed as prayer, community and service.

For his own time St Ignatius intuited that a key pastoral need lay in training people to pray in a way that would foster evangelization of the heart or "intimate knowledge of our Lord". In his period of so much upheaval, he insisted that only with a love of the Church could genuine renewal of faith take place. And the goal of his *Exercises* is to form contemplatives in action: like St James in the New Testament he wants a faith that would prove itself in "*deeds rather than in words*".

In other words there are three excitingly effective supports for faith growth even in a culture of unbelief. They bring together the dimensions of spirituality, community, and active service of justice, especially on behalf of the wounded of the world. Granted that ours is a culture that trusts experience and living witnesses, these dimensions have to be rooted in practice. But when that is achieved, a powerful pastoral response to unbelief emerges. Indeed I would argue that whenever one of these pillars is strong, faith has less problems, and whenever all three converge in pastoral practice, faith is

usually flourishing and a living attraction for those on the margins of church or faith.

Ministry of Decision

Cardinal Newman once remarked that a new question needs a new answer. Perhaps it is the adventure of church history to forge ever new languages for communicating the gospel. St Ignatius helped shape a new language of faith for his time of crisis. The emphasis here has been on his sensitivity to human realities and on his concrete ways of guiding people towards an encounter with God. He spoke of his *Spiritual Exercises* as a path to making a good decision and in today's world faith needs to be more and more a lived decision, even against the prevailing tides. In modern terms Ignatius developed a ministry of faith option. By way of bald summary we might see that ministry as involving five steps:

- *Give them wonder*: this involves many ways of awakening the religious sense, of fostering a disposition of openness and hunger, and of reverence before the mystery of God.
- *Give them armour*: this entails alerting people to the idols around and providing them with tools of positive and non-pessimistic critique.
- *Give them Christ through prayer*: at the heart of evangelization is the personal recognition and surrender of self to the person of Jesus Christ.
- *Give them friends in faith*: this element was stronger in the life of Ignatius than in the *Exercises* and the same hunger for community is being rediscovered in many ways in today's Church.
- *Give them scope for self-giving*: Christians who have some way of contact and commitment with the poor often find their faith nourished in the spirit of the Beatitudes.

In short, our imagining of what Ignatius might say about unbelief has to do justice to his mysticism and to his practicality. His own pastoral work began simply as a friend talking to friends about God. Gradually he found himself drawn to serve the known world of his day and sending his companions into very diverse situations of faith struggle. He trained them to set free the deep human desire for God. He understood that the journey towards faith can be slow and hesitant, but that there are ways of helping people expand from the unfreedom of unbelief into the costly freedom of faith.

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