FACING RACE

The Gospel in an Ignatian Key

Roger Haight, SJ

ORBIS BOOKS
Maryknoll, New York 10545

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Published by Orbis Books, Box 302, Maryknoll, NY 10545-0302.

Manufactured in the United States of America

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Names: Haight, Roger, author.
Title: Facing race : the gospel in an Ignatian key / Roger Haight, S.J.
Description: Maryknoll, NY : Orbis Books, [2024] | Includes bibliographical references and index. | Summary: "A reading of the Ignatian Spiritual Exercises in which the social reality of racism provides a concrete reference for the meaning of sin"— Provided by publisher.
Identifiers: LCCN 2024017100 (print) | LCCN 2024017101 (ebook) | ISBN 9781626985858 (trade paperback) | ISBN 9798888660409 (epub)
Subjects: LCSH: Race relations—Religious aspects—Christianity. | Racism—Religious aspects—Christianity. | Social justice—Religious aspects—Christianity. | Ignatius, of Loyola, Saint, 1491-1556. Exercitia spiritualia.
Classification: LCC BT734.2 .H25 2024 (print) | LCC BT734.2 (ebook) | DDC 241/.675—dc23/eng/20240523
LC record available at https://lccn.loc.gov/2024017100
LC ebook record available at https://lccn.loc.gov/2024017101

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Preface

Some years ago, Pamela Cooper White, Union Theological Seminary's academic dean, asked me to teach a course that discussed how Christian spirituality as a practice and discipline might support the lives of people who work against the many forms of social injustice that infect our lives today. Because I am a Jesuit, I naturally turned to the Spiritual Exercises of Ignatius of Loyola as a way of formulating the dynamics of Christian spirituality. Among the forms of social injustice found in the United States, racism stands out. The analysis contained in this work grew out of the application of the Exercises to racism in America and expanded beyond the limitations of the course on both sides of the interaction.

On the side of what is called "race," I became familiar with Black culture in a parish community on the South Side of Chicago when I was a graduate student and later when I taught for seven years in an integrated neighborhood. Living and working in Asia for many years taught me to appreciate another culture's dynamics, surely not "from inside," but closely enough to appreciate another ethos as different, autonomous, coherent, and valuable. Living within another culture involves constant learning,

even without formal analysis, and one of the deepest lessons learned falls within the domain of self-knowledge: one cannot really speak for a culture not one's own. In this work I give Blacks their own voice.

On the side of "spirituality," I expected to find a body of literature that factored racism into the sphere of Ignatian spirituality but found little that fitted my needs. Analytical appreciation of the Exercises has not caught up to a critical appreciation of racism. A growing body of practical resources for administering the Exercises in a way that directly shapes meditations has begun to appear, but the analytical work of adapting the Exercises to a racially unjust social and cultural framework is only beginning. This allows me to state clearly at the outset that I do not appeal to the Spiritual Exercises of Ignatius as a studied expositor. Rather, as a theologian, I look to the text of Ignatius as mirroring the narrative structure of the formation of Christian faith as a distinctive spiritual tradition. By penetrating to the nature of Christian faith, the Exercises are able to show clearly that one cannot be a Christian racist, that Christian faith is intrinsically anti-racist.[1]

This work offers a theological analysis of Christian spirituality in the face of racism in America. It looks at existential spirituality as the way persons or groups lead their lives in relation to what they consider ultimate. The significant element of this open view lies in ultimacy, the supreme value operative in a person's life. This centering value pro-

1. The obvious retort to this assertion says it cannot be true because there are so many Christian racists. This is no slight observation. But I hope to reply to it through theology as a normative discipline rather than by moral exhortation. My conclusion is either that Christian racists are not really Christian or that many of us are Christians in an ignorant, or incoherent, or self-willed, or deficient way.

vides the formal criterion for gathering all the things that human beings consciously do within the sphere of spirituality, making it an intimate mantle that wraps identity with comprehensive meaning. Spirituality so understood means that all people have some spirituality. The comprehensive understanding of spirituality shows the importance it carries for a given person or group. The following pages put spirituality at the center of Christianity and show how it should position the churches relative to racism in American culture and society.

Something about spirituality tends to restrict it to an individualistic and private sphere, at least in the United States. This does not necessarily entail a lack of social consciousness on the part of one who attends to a spiritual life. But human beings possess an ability to construct compartments in life that are distinct from others. Such a process helps impose order on the world and within one's own life. Yet it often results in restricting spirituality to a domain so solitary that its intrinsic social dimensions remain hidden from the self.[2]

It may be taken for granted today that in a land of religious plurality each person is free to define their own religious identity. The American Constitution seeks to preserve religion and thus spiritual freedom from outside interference and to protect government from religious particularism. While this may not be entirely successful, at least it has allowed religious pluralism to thrive in America. But the result of this protection also leans toward privatization of one's personal spirituality, even within a given

2. "Racial oppression requires and stimulates in the oppressors a lack of recognition of the full humanity of the exploited and racialized others." Joe R. Faegin, *Systematic Racism: A Theory of Oppression* (New York: Routledge, 2006), 27.

religious tradition. In the end, despite all the external influences, I alone am responsible for my spiritual relationship with God.

Another line of reflection runs counter to individualism and the privatization of spirituality. It draws evidence from personal self-consciousness, developmental psychology, and the very structure of religious consciousness. Innumerable factors feed into everyone's social subjectivity. People cannot realistically imagine themselves apart from the world to which they belong. A newborn requires a long period of care and input to develop an integrated personality. Individual persons cannot come to any self-definition without considering the narrative of the many influences that have helped shape them. Pierre Teilhard de Chardin offered a striking image for the social constitution of the self: We exist supported by the two hands of God. One creating hand of God directly holds us in existence; the other co-creating hand of God, itself created by God, is the world of nature, society, and those individual beings that nurture us along the way.[3] People are social individuals whether they know it or not. Our conscience and our deepest spiritualities are ours and at the same time continually given to us.

This book is about Christian spirituality. It proposes a theological account of the inner dynamics of Christian life. The tensive relationship between being a member of the Christian community and being an autonomous individual citizen runs through the pages of this work. Theology appeals to the community's authoritative sources, but actual Christian behavior is driven by more social and particular reasons than can be told. The response of the citizen fre-

3. Pierre Teilhard de Chardin, *The Divine Milieu: An Essay on the Interior Life* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1960), 47–51.

quently contradicts the spirituality of the community. The conjunction of the two perspectives, the distinguishing and the holding together, complicates the task of explaining why Christian spirituality has to overcome individualism and privatization in order to become accountable to or for structural social issues generally, and in this case racism.

I have chosen to use the Spiritual Exercises of Ignatius Loyola as a tool for analyzing this task partly because it represents my own religious family.[4] But Ignatius's Exercises are more than idiosyncratically his own; they reflect the initial genesis of Christianity and give expression to the essence of its spirituality. The reasons for this were mainly accidents of history. The catalyst of Ignatius's conversion from military and political operative to Christian pilgrim was occasioned by a wound in battle and the reading material available to him in convalescence. He had the gospel texts contained within a larger compendium of commentary. He became so focused on Jesus that he transcribed his words as they appeared in the gospel stories. He thus assumed a new persona by a fixation on Jesus and an intense internalization of the desire to become a disciple. His rebirth reenacted the pattern that generated the gospels, and this, in turn, is reflected in his Spiritual Exercises.

But the dramatic story of Ignatius's conversion also reinforces its appeal to individual persons. Although he sought to share with others his experiences of taking up a new way of life, he offered the Spiritual Exercises to individuals rather than to societies or for the cure of social disease. Even as a tool of Jesuit formation, they appeal to each one as part of a process of socialization. They deal almost exclusively

4. Ignatius Loyola, *The Spiritual Exercises of Saint Ignatius*, ed. George E. Ganss (Chicago: Loyola Press, 1992).

with personal sin and its mythic background as found in scripture and doctrine, and they offer each individual who makes them a path of personal life that focuses particular attention on each one's past, present, and future. The Exercises were not composed in order to call attention and respond to structural social sin but to individual sin in order to release personal freedom and commitment.

The language of personal sin as distinct from structural sin sets up the deeper problem that this book addresses. Personal sin, although occasioned by history and circumstance, always wells up from within subjectivity and freedom, so that each one is accountable for it. Sin refers to moral defection from a norm; it is something for which a person is responsible and guilty. Structural sin, by contrast, refers to patterns of behavior in a social body that exist prior to any given individual who enters and participates in the group. Relative to each individual member, structural sin is part of the world as he or she finds it. Young people do not share individual responsibility for patterns into which they are socialized.[5] The idea of structural sin as distinct from evil thus seems inherently paradoxical. If this be the case, the Ignatian language that calls for shame and repentance for personal sinful acts does not fit an often-unknowing participation in structural sin, patterns of behavior that may contribute to the ruin of many innocent victims even though the actions seem normal and are legally protected.

On this supposition, using the structure of the Spiritual Exercises as a program that addresses the structural sins of society rather than the personal sins of individuals requires

5. These are typological descriptions rather than close analytical concepts: one can imagine someone designing a structurally sinful organized crime and another person innocent of his or her materially sinful behavior.

an adjustment of language. Refocusing the Spiritual Exercises on participation in a culture and society that one calls sinful and thus involves moral guilt also shifts the goal of the Exercises. This is not an easy process, and it requires distinctions and appropriate language for its applicability. For example, when Ignacio Ellacuría was leading the Spiritual Exercises for Jesuits in San Salvador in the late 1960s and early 1970s, his fundamental intention was less to renew their personal lives as each one had done for years, and more to make them aware of the sinful dimensions of the social and cultural context in which they were living.[6] This required less an examination of conscience and more an examination of the social reality of systemic poverty and conflict in which they lived. Like all the light we cannot see before we turn a new telescope on the vast space above, so too an examination of our own societies uncovers the systemic repression, physical and mental suffering, and restriction of opportunity and creativity of Blacks that remain hidden in a routine status quo. Social analysis examines the relations that we do not see or to which we've become accustomed: the perceptions, the ideas, the values, the feelings, the joys, the psychic energy, the fears, the stifled freedom, the dead ends, the impasses, the ordinary goals that remain impossible for so many, all the things present in society that remain invisible or taken for granted without examination.

This work aims at directing the Christian imagination toward the sin of racism through the lens of the gospel mediated by the Ignatian Spiritual Exercises. It views racism not as personal sin but as structural sin, a notion that is real but

6. I will expand this example in Chapter III. The point here is to underline the character of this work as trying to capture the intrinsic logic of Christian spirituality in the face of fundamental flaws in American culture and society.

subtle and requires explanation. Its purpose is not to uncover particular acts of racism, but to expand people's consciousness and conscience. It seeks to open up and reveal a still largely hidden world that contains a moral imperative for a common good. This social interpretation does not substitute for or compete with a traditional use of the Exercises. It is directed to those who are interested in the dynamics of racism, Christian spirituality, the Spiritual Exercises of Ignatius Loyola, and theology as a discipline. For spirituality is not only continually informed by theology but may also open new horizons that elicit new theological understanding that in turn transforms a Christian way of life.

This is a work of Christian theology. The discussion begins with a brief theoretical statement about the nature of the discipline and the role played by the Spiritual Exercises.[7] Two main reasons account for this formal introduction. The first comes from its implied audience that includes but also reaches beyond the Christian faith community. One could write this book with an extended exegesis of Jesus's parable of the Good Samaritan. But in an intercommunicating religiously plural world, Christian theologians have to appeal to more extensive foundations than the authority of a tradition's sources. Christian theology must explicitly aim at a language that appeals to commonly accepted humanistic ideas and values. This book makes the case that Christian faith intrinsically rejects racism and that this stance will find

7. Those unconcerned with discussions of method may begin reading with Chapter II. Those completely unfamiliar with the discipline of theology may be frustrated with the abstract character of this initial discussion. And those familiar with such things may be unconvinced of a need for it. Nevertheless, as a prelude, it defines the theological viewpoint operative in this work.

resonance with other faith traditions with whom we may create common cause.

The other reason relates to the use of the Spiritual Exercises of Ignatius Loyola, which occupies a particular place among many Christian schools of spirituality. As such, it carries a substantial tradition of literature about its history and contemporary practice. But the theological appeal to the Exercises in this work narrows the focus of attention to basic issues. One is found in an appeal to a particular interpretation of the elementary structure of the Spiritual Exercises: its initial focus on sin, its turn to the ministry of Jesus, and its purpose of drawing forth from a person a commitment to a form of action. Another rests in a correlation of that basic structure with the way persons are drawn to Christian faith itself. These moves do not add up to a desire to dictate how the Exercises should be adapted to specific Christian seekers. But it supports the affirmation of the Catholic bishops in Synod in 1971: "Action on behalf of justice and participation in the transformation of the world fully appear to us as a constitutive dimension of the preaching of the gospel."[8] The initial discussion of theology forms the basis of this claim by grounding Christian anti-racism in the very structure and essence of Christian faith. The world demands a deep account of the hope that is within us (1 Pet 3:15).

An overview of the chapters will set the direction of the discussion. The first chapter presents a number of basic ideas underlying the Christian theology that informs the presentation. The plurality of religious traditions in America and the pluralism of Christian theologies require that certain

8. Synod of Bishops, "Justice in the World" (Nov. 30, 1971), #6.

traditional ideas be revised lest the project be compromised.[9] This analysis draws Christian theology and the Spiritual Exercises into a distinctive situation of social injustice. And both are being reinterpreted because the situation calls upon them to formulate a Christian self-understanding and way of life that address society. Theology probes the way Christian spirituality is applied to the context, and spirituality challenges theology to show the relevance of Christian faith for how to react to a racist society. Theology and spirituality unite in following the Exercises back to Jesus and his Hebrew ancestors for a religious response to racism.

The second chapter describes racism directed against African Americans. This limitation of the range of racism does not reflect the depth, complexity, and expansiveness of the phenomenon in American life. Racism draws into itself other sources, biases, resentments, and forms of aggressiveness that mark American history and present-day life, such as Eurocentrism and a colonialist imagination. Rather than offer an archaeology of racism, the imaginative framework of this work focuses on the case of African Americans. Such a chapter should be excerpted from James Baldwin or Ta-Nehisi Coates. But the chapters that follow the description of racism require the author's understanding of the subject

9. These adjustments are in line with the "paradigm shift" that Pope Francis calls for in his *motu proprio* "Ad Theologiam Promovendam" (Nov. 1, 2023). He writes: "It is a matter of the pastoral 'stamp' that theology as a whole, and not only in one of its particular spheres, must assume: without opposing theory and practice, theological reflection is urged to develop with an inductive method, which starts from the different contexts and concrete situations in which peoples are inserted, allowing itself to be seriously challenged by reality, in order to become discernment of the 'signs of the times' in the proclamation of the salvific event of the God-agape, communicated in Jesus Christ" (#8).

matter. The brevity and objectivity of the account may require indulgence from those more deeply affected by the injury of racism.

The third, fourth, and fifth chapters of the book correlate with a three-part understanding of the structure of the Spiritual Exercises. They may briefly be characterized as (a) a consciousness of sin, in this case the structural sin of racism that infects American society, (b) a turn to Jesus of Nazareth as found in the gospels and what he represented by his ministry, and (c) an appropriation of Jesus into the lives of people who make the Exercises, with racism as the sin that must be addressed. This basic structure corresponds with the way many theologians across the centuries have represented as a common structure of both revelation and a personal conversion to Christian faith. The dynamic structure of the Exercises captures something foundational in the logic of Christian life.

This three-dimensional structure also uncannily resembles what Edward Schillebeeckx called a negative experience of contrast. He believed that the starting point for ethics lies not in an awareness of an ordered world that is rationally coherent, but of the actual world where things are disordered. Moral reasoning begins with a deep experience of unease and then indignation at the evil in a situation that should not be. The same outrage contains dimensions of a contrasting better way of being: "We do not have to live this way." These insights elicit an urge to strive for a new form of being. These three dimensions of a single complex experience reflect a transcendental possibility of moral conversion.[10] The account of racism in America sets up a problem that transcends this

10. See LaReine-Marie Mosely, "Negative Contrast Experience: An Ignatian Appraisal," *Horizons* 41 (2014): 74–95.

or that racist action or this or that personal racist attitude. The problem lies more deeply in the objective rootedness of racism in American life and whether Christian spirituality really appreciates how pervasively racism is embedded in American society. This correlation sets up a way of explaining that Christian spirituality includes a profoundly relevant social moral conscience.

The third chapter begins the constructive argument. It dwells on racism as structural sin. The word "sin" refers to an act that is wrong, perhaps evil, and involves a personal action that includes knowledge and deliberate free agency. A person is responsible for sinful action and should feel guilty, responsible, and accountable. One stands guilty before God, not because of a known divine injunction but because of the intrinsic evil of the action, usually its injurious effect on other creatures. Given the pointed character of sin as it is traditionally understood, the phrase "structural sin" appears paradoxical, because "structure" connotes objective patterns of behavior and "sin" suggests subjective freedom and intentionality. Thus, two distinct things are discussed in the third chapter and, while not opposed, they require delicate coordination. On the one hand, structures can be sinful, not because they are sustained by any person's individual freedom but because of the corporate freedom of a society that sustains them and the participation in them by individuals. On the other hand, therefore, social responsibility is real even though it does not necessarily reach the level of being a personally responsible action. It is far easier to describe the effects of social sin than to parse the responsibility of the individuals who are involved in it. The third chapter thus shows where critical awareness of American culture and society should reorient Christian consciousness and conscience so that Christian faith can be a stronger positive

anti-racist catalyst in American society than it seems to be statistically.

The fourth and fifth chapters both consider the ministry of Jesus of Nazareth: the fourth discusses Jesus as modeling the rule of God; the fifth addresses how Ignatius leads a person to appropriate the message. Jesus provides the centering form of a Christian's faith in God and of the spirituality involved in being a Christian. Both in terms of a theological conception of salvation and of a spirituality of following Jesus Christ, Jesus's ministry mediates the fundamental shape of the faith of the Christian. Jesus of Nazareth stands at the center of both being a Christian and the logic of the Spiritual Exercises. He is the hinge on which Christian faith moves in two distinct ways that are represented in these two chapters; he mediates both understanding and motivation. In the fourth chapter Jesus is presented more or less objectively as he appeared in history and how he appears in the gospels.[11] Theologically, Jesus of Nazareth was/is the revelation of God for Christian faith. More exactly, he revealed the "rule of God," a phrase that renders "the kingdom of God" in a more active and intentional way. The phrase "rule of God" also correlates with the narrative form of Jesus's ministry as the medium of his revealing. Jesus revealed God by speaking about and acting out the intention of the Creator. While the fourth chapter describes in broad strokes what Jesus stands for in objective terms, the fifth chapter contains

11. This book is not an appropriate place for a discussion of how one retrieves the historical figure of Jesus from the gospels. Just as Jesus was represented as an object of faith in the gospels, so too, looking back with the help of biblical scholarship, the person making the Exercises is called by Ignatius to imagine Jesus's appearance, and this can be done in a critical way.

an invitation to discipleship; it presents Jesus as one who gathered people around him and who asks the one making the Exercises to steer his or her life by a decision that either defines a commitment to the rule of God or reinforces one already in place. The backdrop for both discussions is the racism described in the second chapter.

The sixth and final chapter serves as an extended recapitulation and conclusion. It describes the union with God that may be considered the point of Christian spirituality. It draws upon some basic themes that are embedded within the final Exercise of the series proposed by Ignatius. That exercise, which bears the title "Contemplation to Attain Love," provides themes that offer an understanding of union with God that is constituted by anti-racist action. Turning to the Ignatian terms of "finding God in all things" and "contemplation in action," the concluding discussion sums up a Christian spirituality that is intrinsically anti-racist.

This overview of the argument for *Facing Race* should make it clear that this work does not resemble a manual for directing the Spiritual Exercises. Rather, by using the basic structure of the Exercises, it employs them as a way of introducing the message of the gospels in a racist situation.