

The plank in your own eye

Joe Egerton

As the argument over Gordon Brown's style of management continues, Joe Egerton draws on the Spiritual Exercises to suggest that, regardless of how we intend to vote, we cannot approve of the way the issue is being handled, and should pay heed to what the New Testament tells us to do when we don't like the way other people behave.

Gordon Brown is a pleasant, amusing and congenial companion. This is what a professor of politics who has known him personally over many years says when discussing with his students how the very different impression the electorate has of the Prime Minister may affect their voting behaviour. Over the past week, we have been given a description of a very different Gordon Brown from the one his close personal friends offer of the private man, a description built up from anecdotes offered by those who have worked with a man with a volcanic temper and one that is significantly darker than the general public impression of the Prime Minister.

St Ignatius and human psychology

St Ignatius of Loyola can help us to understand this contrast. In the *Spiritual Exercises*¹ there are notes² describing how we can, to some extent, understand and benefit from the different movements in the soul. The analysis applies to each of us because we are all frail human beings, imperfect creatures living in an imperfect world, so each of us has a good and a bad side. In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus warns us:

Why do you inspect the splinter in your brother or sister's eye, but fail to notice the plank that is in your own eye? Or how come you tell your brother or sister 'Just let me get rid of the splinter from your eye', and look! There's a plank in your eye. Fake pietist! First get rid of the plank from your own eye, then you'll see clearly enough to get rid of the splinter from your brother or sister's eye.³



The Prime Minister's alleged failings should not give us comfort – we should not bask in the thought 'I'm not like him'; each of us may without realising it be causing others far more hurt than any Gordon Brown has inflicted.

Central to the analysis of St Ignatius is the idea that we are moved by a good spirit that works inside us towards our true happiness and a bad spirit that works inside us to destroy

us. After discussing how individuals whose lives are given up to pleasure are exposed to the bad spirit – and how the good spirit can move them – St Ignatius goes on to discuss how the bad spirit can seek to damage those who have come to understand that true happiness is not to be achieved through pleasure but responding to a call to realise the potential for good that is in every human being. The bad spirit attacks those on the right path by biting, saddening and putting obstacles in their path, and disquieting them with doubts and false reasoning. The anecdotes retailed in the media are all too obviously those of the effect of the bad spirit working on somebody who has a fundamentally good sense of direction – a moral compass.

This is not, of course, the same as endorsing the policies of the Prime Minister. St Ignatius's analysis of the good and bad spirits is not about intermediate goals or the means used to reach our end – it is about how, having come to see our final end we are distracted by the Enemy.

Should we have been told what we have been told?

None of us would enjoy having our worst side exposed, all the little – and not so little – failings in our lives. For St Thomas Aquinas, telling tales and repeating such gossip is a sin against God – more grievous than an ordinary mortal sin, say theft, in that it damages or destroys the relationship of love and friendship that should exist between the people of God, that is the whole human race⁴. St Ignatius, too, disapproves of public accounts of misdeeds, even if true: ‘Nothing must be said to injure another’s character or to find fault, because if I reveal a mortal sin that is not public, I sin mortally; if a venial sin, venially; and if a defect, I show a defect of my own’⁵. However, this is subject to a qualification: with the right intention,⁶ it is permissible to speak about a public error infecting the minds of those with whom we live.

Does this make the various revelations permissible? Let us start with Mrs Pratt’s email to the BBC.

Mrs Pratt’s revelations

Did she have the right intention? She has told us that she emailed the BBC because due process and the ACAS code had not been followed. This is not the same as seeking to prevent some catastrophe such as the use of nuclear weapons. She did not even claim that there was a risk that an individual would probably being harmed. Her complaint was that a public statement failed to acknowledge due process.

Mrs Pratt’s email should not have been sent to the BBC or to a journalist. We should assume that she sincerely believes that action was needed. But there are other routes she could and should have taken. First, she could have gone to one of her patrons, the Rt Hon Ann Widdecombe MP, and asked her to take the matter up as a Privy Councillor. As a Privy Councillor, Ann Widdecombe can take up allegations with fellow Privy Councillors without them being publicised; and if she had become convinced that a serious problem was being swept under the carpet she would have been well placed to go public. Second, there is a Commons Select Committee, the Public Administration Select Committee (PASC), that has a responsibility to scrutinise such matters and can take evidence in public or private from the Cabinet Secretary, the Principal Private Secretary and, if need

be, the Prime Minister. If the Committee did not think it was getting the whole truth, it could ask to see every member of staff at Number 10. So Mrs Pratt could have gone to the Chair of the PASC, Dr Tony Wright MP, or the Clerk. Third, Mrs Pratt could have written to the Queen’s Private Secretary who would either have passed the letter to the Queen who sees her Prime Minister every week or have discussed the matter with his opposite number in Number 10 Downing Street.

If Mrs Pratt presented evidence that something is seriously wrong in Number 10, it is unlikely that these individuals would have done nothing. If nothing was done, then but only then would there have been a case for going to the BBC.

Mr Rawnsley’s book

The extracts published in the *Observer* and disseminated through the print and broadcast media are certainly unedifying. None of us would enjoy having our less good moments revealed to millions. However there are very good reasons for regarding prohibition of publication of such a book as a greater evil than permitting it. And some – although by no means all – of what we read suggests that things might be done better.

Some of the events are not blameworthy at all. We are given an account of the Prime Minister in 2007 listening to advice from several individuals on whether he should call an election. That is entirely commendable. He used an obscenity when told he had to see some EU ambassadors. One can sympathise with him – when Baldwin (three times prime minister) retired, he observed that the thought that reconciled him to giving up office was never having to meet another French statesman. Many a parent, turned out to collect a teenager from a party, has cursed their offspring, but staying up to the early hours and going out on a cold night is proof that we do love them. A good deal of the stuff that has found its way into the *Observer* probably originated in ‘Gordon’s kicking himself over not spotting X or getting Y wrong.’

It may be that some stories were repeated to Mr Rawnsley with malice aforethought. Certainly some material should never have found its way into the

public domain. The story that something took place between the Prime Minister and the Cabinet Secretary over how he conducted himself towards staff really should not have been repeated. Why? Because each of us from time to time upsets somebody with whom we deal, perhaps unconsciously, perhaps deliberately, perhaps in a bad temper, perhaps without realising at all that we are being misunderstood. It is really important that our friends, those who share our work with us, should be able to help us mend things. The Epistles repeatedly address the problem of how to deal with those who erred in the early Church. St Paul, St Peter and St James are at one in urging kindness, love and help. The message is quite clear: help the person whose conduct is causing offence, don't condemn them. It is impossible to help if any comment is likely to be published as a condemnation. It is therefore absolutely essential that if there has been some unhappy incident the Cabinet Secretary should be able to discuss it candidly and constructively with the Prime Minister.

Waiting for St Bernard of Clairvaux

We are faced with a major problem. The media – broadcast and print – have been taken over by what many who want to see Gordon Brown out of office must nevertheless regard as a repulsive and unwarranted personal attack. St Thomas Aquinas and St Ignatius of Loyola provide compelling arguments against the way these 'revelations' have been made. But there are very good reasons why we should not seek to proscribe such publications by law.

St Bernard declared: 'It is difficult to say which is the more to be condemned - the backbiter or the one who listens to backbiting.'⁷ St Thomas and St Ignatius were gentle souls by comparison with St Bernard – as Peter Abelard would testify. Mr Rawnsley, the *Observer* and all those who have read with relish the personal attack on the Prime Minister have done wrong – and we need Christian leaders to say this with the fervour, clarity and conviction of St Bernard.

A voice of conscience

In the middle ages, the Dominicans were to be found in every court in Europe. They provided something that is lacking in our modern world – a voice of conscience in government. Telling princes 'you must not lie – and that bit of spin is a lie' can have been no more popular in 1300 than delivering the same message to Prime Ministers would have been in 2000.⁸ But in 1300 there were Dominicans to remind princes of the divine law; the *Summa Theologiae* is the greatest of many works written to support this great venture. After 1550, in some courts the Jesuits replaced Dominicans.⁹ This was not an easy role – the Jesuit confessor to a chief minister of Spain was reduced to begging to be relieved of his task because 'hearing the Count-Duke's confession places my immortal soul in jeopardy.'

We have a remnant of this system in such roles as the Speaker's chaplain. But much of the duty of ethical advice has fallen to senior civil servants who also have the sometimes conflicting task of executing policy – we can see this in recently revealed letters between the Chancellor and his Permanent Secretary over providing support to banks, as well as the 'what did he do?' fracas over the Cabinet Secretary's role in the current controversy.

This is a good deal less than satisfactory. We urgently need to find a way, in a secular world, of providing senior ministers in the greatest confidence with the ethical advice that the Dominicans once supplied.

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¹ The *Spiritual Exercises* are a collection of notes based on the mystic experiences of Ignatius of Loyola and of his experience (and those of others) in leading others through exercises to strengthen the soul as physical exercise strengthens the body. The intended reader is the director or guide of the person making the exercises, so the book is a manual for a trainer. Ignatius had not originally intended to publish his notes, and they were only published because the numbers leading others through the exercises grew so large that publication in book form was unavoidable. So the printed version was produced long after Ignatius first started to help others in the exercises and after he had achieved a Master's degree in Philosophy at Paris. The text in a number of places shows the influence especially of Aristotle ('the Philosopher' for the 12th to 16th centuries) and of St Thomas Aquinas (Ignatius studied under Dominicans at Paris). This makes the Exercises unusual among spiritual writings for their ability to help non-Christians – when Jerome Nadal, the chief of staff of the young Society of Jesus, was asked 'Who are the Exercises for?', he answered 'Everyone – Catholic, Protestant, pagan.' *The Rules for the discernment of spirits* (which we can be confident are based on the earliest spiritual experiences of Ignatius) have an opening structure – the rejection of the life given to pleasure, the challenges of a life directed to our final end – that would be immediately recognised by any sixteenth century philosopher as pre-supposing a key distinction drawn in the tenth book of the *Nicomachean Ethics*.

² Translations of the *Spiritual Exercises* use the word 'Rules'. To the 21st century mind, 'rules' are rigid – not to be broken. In the sixteenth century, anyone trained in philosophy – and most of those giving the Exercises would have been so trained – would have learned from Aristotle that rules in ethics can only apply 'generally and for the

most part'. The overriding concern is to direct one's actions to one's end (*telos*) and there was no dispute among sixteenth century theologians and philosophers that the end of humans was to achieve happiness with God. This is set out in the *Exercises* in the *First Principle and Foundation*. So 'Rules' is a misleading title for the 21st century reader. 'Rules' in the Exercises are guidance.

³ Matthew 7:1-5, [Nicholas King's](#) *The New Testament freshly translated*, Kevin Mayhew.

⁴ [ST IIa IIae Q74 Art 2](#)

⁵ Exx41

⁶ Intention is a central concept in Catholic theology and philosophy. Alasdair MacIntyre's *God, Philosophy and Universities* discusses the importance of intention in Catholic philosophy, emphasising the contribution of Elizabeth Anscombe to modern thinking on the subject. St Thomas Aquinas sees a bad intention as a necessary ingredient for sin, drawing on Aristotle. David Bostock's *Aristotle's Ethics* contains an accessible and valuable introduction to the thinking of Aristotle on this.

⁷ De consid. Ii 13, quoted by Aquinas,

[ST IIa IIae Q73 Art 4](#)

⁸ It is clear from the *Summa* (a product of what we would call graduate classes) that when Thomas told his 20-something students 'fornication is a mortal sin' they retaliated by asking about the mortal sin of gluttony.

⁹ Important to the development of modern economics, the Jesuits also developed a mission of providing guidance to merchants in cities like Antwerp on what we would call 'business ethics'. This led to the transmission of ideas developed at Salamanca – ideas that Hayek regarded as doing more than Calvin in enabling the development of the modern commercial economy. This work was halted by the suppression of the Society in the 18th century, a period that saw (see Alasdair MacIntyre, op.cit.) the absence of the Church during a critical period in philosophical development.