

IGNATIUS AND THE STARS

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THE IMAGE OF IGNATIUS gazing in wonder at the stars is one which seems to endear him to many people today. It appears frequently in modern biographies and personal portraits of him, especially where authors want to evoke Ignatius' incarnational spirituality and mysticism. It has also been captured in art. These references often carry romantic overtones, such as Michael Paul Gallagher's affectionate description of him as 'the mystic on the balcony'.¹ Since the rediscovery of his *Autobiography, Spiritual Diary* and other early sources, Ignatius' stargazing, like his copious tears, seems to have struck an emotional chord with people, evoking a softer and more soulful saint than the rather austere pin-up of the Counter-Reformation commonly encountered prior to Vatican II.²

There is something attractive and mysterious about Ignatius' relationship with the stars and our privileged glimpses of him at night, lost in contemplation of them. It is not surprising, then, that his stargazing is usually a keynote of the more human and appealing revisionist image of Ignatius, which reveals the depths of his affectivity, his intimacy with God the Creator and even his ec-mysticism, as has been argued recently.³ However, while our imaginative and affective engagement is to be encouraged, we need to be careful not to enlist Ignatius' stargazing too eagerly as evidence of his proto-modernity.

I would like to explore here what happens to our imaginings when we consider Ignatius' relationship with the stars with more

¹ Michael Paul Gallagher, 'Ignatius of Loyola', in *Spiritual Stars of the Millennium*, edited by Selina O'Grady and John Wilkins (London: Bloomsbury Continuum, 2001), 64.

² See chapter 5, 'Ad Majorem Dei Gloriam', in James Martin, *My Life with the Saints* (Chicago: Loyola, 2006).

³ See Hedwig Lewis, *St Ignatius Loyola: Retrospective—Perspective—Reflective* (Anand: Gujarat Sahitya Prakash, 2006), chapter 1.

historical distance and look at the night sky, alongside Ignatius, through the lens of medieval cosmology.

Whatever the resonances with us today, the stars clearly meant something to Ignatius himself, and his lifelong habit of contemplating them was noted by those closest to him. The first reference to it occurs in his own words, as recorded by the Portuguese Jesuit Gonçalves da Câmara, as he describes the latter end of Ignatius' recovery in Loyola in late 1521 to early 1522:

Part of that time he would spend in writing, part in prayer. And the greatest consolation he used to receive was to look at the sky and the stars, which he did often and for a long time, because with this he used to feel in himself a great impetus towards serving Our Lord. (*Autobiography*, n.11)

Ignatius' great longing at this time was to be on his way to Jerusalem, imitating Saints Francis and Dominic, and it was the stars that consoled him in his time of impatient waiting. The passage above goes on immediately to say: 'he often used to think about his intention, wishing he was already completely well so as to begin on his way'. We might imagine Ignatius, with his itchy feet, longing for the road and the skies above Jerusalem. What was it about gazing up at the night sky that consoled him so much at this time, we might wonder—so much more, we are told, than his writing and other prayer experiences during this fertile spiritual period in his life. What caused him to feel interiorly such 'impetus' to serving God?

It is perhaps worth mentioning that his idol St Francis was also a noted stargazer, as his friend and first biographer Thomas of Celano confirmed: 'Who would be able to narrate the sweetness he enjoyed while contemplating in creatures the wisdom of their Creator ... while he gazed upon the stars and the firmament?'⁴ It is tempting to think that Ignatius was in some way influenced in his behaviour by his strong affinity with Francis—whose own dreams of military success had been checked by illness and who later in life experienced eye-sickness 'for continual weeping' during

⁴ Thomas of Celano, *First Biography of St Francis*, n.81, translated by Placid Hermann, in *Writings and Early Biographies: English Omnibus of the Sources for the Life of St Francis*, edited by Marion Habig (Chicago: Franciscan Herald, 1983), 295.

prayer, a phenomenon that also affected Ignatius. But if Ignatius was aware of this aspect of St Francis, he did not get it from his reading material in Loyola Castle.⁵

The most frequently cited reference to Ignatius and the stars is from his time in Rome, some two decades later as he approached the end of his life. By now he was Father General of the burgeoning Society, largely tied to his desk as an administrator and no longer free to wander the roads of Europe beneath the stars. Each night, on the balcony of the Jesuit residence, it is said that he would look up in reverence at the stars and silently shed tears.⁶ It is a moving and intimate picture that seems to have originated from the first official biography of Ignatius, by a Jesuit who knew him well at this time. Pedro de Ribadeneira makes clear in his account that Ignatius' stargazing habit—which began at the time of his conversion at Loyola—remained with him for the whole of his life:

... because many years later, already an old man, I would see him on a rooftop, or in some high place, from where he could see the horizon and a large part of the sky, fixing his eyes on it. And after some time spent in rapture and amazement, he would come to himself, moved, and with tears pouring from his eyes because of the great delight that his heart felt, I would hear him say: 'Oh, how vile and low the earth seems to me! When I look at the sky, it is manure and garbage.'⁷

This was a pattern of behaviour, of prayer, which had stayed with Ignatius since the earliest days of his conversion and which seems to have consistently consoled him and drawn him closer to his

⁵ The most likely 'life of the saints' read by Ignatius at this time is a vernacular version of the widely diffused *Legenda aurea* by Jacobus de Voragine, which has no mention of the stargazing episode in its account of Francis: see José Ignacio Tellechea Idígoras, *Ignatius Loyola: The Pilgrim Saint*, translated by Cornelius Michael Buckley (Chicago: Loyola, 1994), 120; *The Golden Legend: Lives of the Saints*, translated by William Caxton, edited by George V. O'Neill (Cambridge: CUP, 1914).

⁶ See MHSJ FN 4, 746–748; Pedro de Ribadeneira, *The Life of Ignatius Loyola*, translated by Claude Pavur (St Louis: Institute of Jesuit Sources, 2014), 5.1.15; and Kevin F. Burke and Eileen Burke-Sullivan, *The Ignatian Tradition* (Collegeville: Liturgical, 2009), xxxv.

⁷ 'Porque muchos años después, siendo ya viejo, le vi yo estando en alguna açutea, o en algún lugar eminente y alto de donde se descubría nuestro emisferio y buena parte del cielo, enclavar los ojos en él; y a cabo de rato que avía estado como hombre arrobado y suspenso y que bolví en sí, se enterneció; y saltándosele las lágrimas de los ojos (por el deleite grande que tenía su corazón), le oía decir: — Ay cuán vil y baxa me parece la tierra, quando miro al cielo, estiérco y vasura es.' (MHSJ FN 4, 95, translated by the author and Marta Gil de Sola Bellas) It is interesting to note that the Spanish is much more revealing in this instance than the more abridged Latin version of Ribadeneira's text, recently translated into English by Claude Pavur.

Creator and Lord. But what do we imagine was going on for Ignatius in his contemplation of the night sky? What do we make of his tears and delight, or his striking words, if Ribadeneira's memory is to be relied upon?

Ignatius' stargazing obviously leaves room for some interpretation and projection, which is perhaps encouraged by its evocativeness. We can too easily picture the scene for ourselves and be tempted to step clumsily into his mental or emotional space. One corrective to this which is easily forgotten is historical distance. Since we can all think of ourselves looking up at the night sky we imagine that all people in all times and places have always looked at it the same way. But looking is an intensely subjective activity that is also shaped significantly by society and culture over time. As L. P. Hartley famously put it in his novel *The Go-Between*: 'the past is a foreign country: they do things differently there'. Perhaps there is a need to recover some of Ignatius' foreignness to us in that regard if we are to begin to appreciate the place of the stars in his imagination?

Looking is an intensely subjective activity

For those of us living in the early twenty-first century, it is difficult to gaze at the night sky without our looking being influenced by two important filters that would have been absent for Ignatius: our knowledge of modern science and cosmology, and our very modern sensibility towards the natural world in general following the Romantic movement of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. Both of these are so embedded in the way we look at, feel and talk about nature or creation today that they can easily avoid detection, and we risk unwittingly projecting them backwards on to our ancestors who lived, thought and contemplated in quite a different mental universe.

The differences in scientific outlook are easier for us to grasp, but it is also easy to overlook the significant shift in attitudes towards creation influenced by the Romantic movement, with its cult of sensibility and new notion of the 'sublime', whose vestiges we still carry around with us today.⁸ For example, our modern way of looking at, say, a mountain range or great waterfall—evoking

⁸ See Duncan Heath and Judy Boreham, *Introducing Romanticism: A Graphic Guide* (London: Icon, 2010).

language of wonder and awe in us—is quite different from how the same features would have been taken in by people of Ignatius’ generation, who are more likely to have framed their experience as terror or even revulsion. Nature tourism and our modern sense of appreciation of much of the natural world did not emerge until the early industrial age.

It would be a mistake and an anachronism, then, to superimpose on to Ignatius much later and more familiar ways of seeing the night sky, such as the ‘admiration and awe’ towards the ‘starry heavens above’ of an Immanuel Kant, writing in 1788, or the breathless ‘Look at the stars! look, look up at the skies!’ of Gerard Manley Hopkins in 1877.⁹ Kant’s famous passage, taken in context, not only exemplifies fairly well the quite recent sense of the sublime, but it also illustrates an already modern cosmology, post-Copernican and post-Newtonian. His admiration and awe come from his sense of smallness and insignificance in relation to the vastness of the universe, gazing above himself:

A countless multitude of worlds annihilates as it were my importance as an animal creature, which after it has been for a short time provided with vital power, one knows not how, must again give back the matter of which it was formed to the planet it inhabits (a mere speck in the universe).¹⁰

Ignatius, living in a very different age and seeing through quite different filters, might have experienced similar emotions but they would have been for quite different reasons.

Ignatius was possessed of a thoroughly medieval imagination, which applies to his stargazing as much as to his images of God, his penchant for chivalry or his views on hell, with which we might be more familiar. Although he lived during a period of dramatic change in Europe—as printing brought about an ‘information revolution’ and the effects of global exploration, economic and

⁹ ‘Two things fill the mind with ever new and increasing admiration and awe, the oftener and the more steadily we reflect on them: the starry heavens above and the moral law within’: Immanuel Kant, ‘Critique of Practical Reason’, in *Kant’s Critique of Practical Reason and Other Works on the Theory of Ethics*, translated by Thomas Kingsmill Abbott (London: Longmans Green, 1879), 376; Gerard Manley Hopkins, ‘The Starlight Night’, in *Hopkins: Poems and Prose* (London: Everyman, 1995), 24.

¹⁰ Kant, ‘Critique of Practical Reason’, 376–377.

political expansion, and religious reform had their impact on people's lives in myriad ways—there was still much in his time that remained the same. A man or woman from Europe in the 1520s or 1550s looking up at the night sky saw much the same ordered, earth-orbiting universe as his or her ancestors of a hundred or even three hundred years before, and Ignatius would have been no exception.

It is very easy to caricature what such people believed they saw—and medieval cosmology in general—as absurdly naive and inaccurate, perhaps even at odds with the astonishingly prescient spiritual insights of somebody such as Ignatius, which we might think emerged in spite of the intellectual and scientific limitations of his day rather than from within their framework. But to do so is not only unfair—taking advantage of our hindsight—it also does a disservice to what was a complex, multifaceted and highly adaptive worldview, and ends up just repeating the anti-medieval propaganda of the founding figures of modern science much later in the period.¹¹

Although a contemporary of the great Polish astronomer Nicolaus Copernicus, Ignatius would almost certainly have lived, like the vast majority of his contemporaries, in complete ignorance of the new heliocentric theory that Copernicus published, reluctantly, in the year of his death, 1543.¹² Ignatius certainly would not have been rocked to the core by that theory—even in the unlikely event that he had come across it, as a mathematical model being debated by specialist academics. The immediate impact of *On the Revolutions of the Heavenly Spheres* was nowhere near as revolutionary as its title, or popular history, likes to claim.

Owing in part to its prologue—where the theory was presented as a hypothesis not as fact—Copernicus' work did not attract much controversy, and the Church had no trouble accepting it initially as another contribution to the debate and reform of classical cosmology, still dominated by Ptolemy's *Almagest* and the

¹¹ See Anthony Grafton, *New Worlds, Ancient Texts: The Power of Tradition and the Shock of Discovery* (Cambridge, Ma: Harvard U, 1995), 7.

¹² Before 1543 Copernicus' theory remained in manuscript and the topic of private discussion only: see Euan Cameron, 'The Power of the Word: Renaissance and Reformation', in *Early Modern Europe: An Oxford History* (Oxford: OUP, 2001), 79.

physics of Aristotle.¹³ In fact only a tiny handful of academics read it, and full-scale debate in Europe over the potentially huge and destabilising implications of heliocentrism did not erupt until decades after Ignatius' death, a turning point being the appearance of an apparently 'new' star in the Tycho supernova of 1572. In Spain, there was only one recognised 'Copernican' while Ignatius was still active, and Copernicus' text was only included in the astronomy curriculum at the University of Salamanca in 1561.¹⁴ Galileo's wider publication of the theory and his tussle with Rome were even further off on the horizon.¹⁵

When it comes to his stargazing, then, we have to set Ignatius firmly beneath the geocentric medieval firmament. So, what would men and women of Ignatius' day imagine they saw when they looked up at the night sky? How might that have affected Ignatius' looking?

Standing on the surface of the Earth—at once the very centre and the very lowest point in the entire cosmos, in an absolute sense—looking up (again in an absolute sense), they would have seen the harmonious heavenly spheres above them. While down on earth all was change and decay, below the moon's orbit; up above the stars could be observed turning in changeless perfection. The seven mobile planets, fixed in their transparent, crystalline spheres, stacked one upon the other in their separate orbits—Moon, Mercury, Venus, Sun, Mars, Jupiter and Saturn—and beyond this, there was the canopy of the fixed stars, or *Stellatum*, the last visible place between humanity and the dwelling place of God. Stargazers would look up and see the dome of heaven itself directly above them—a place beyond space and time yet full of God, light and love—almost as we would look up at the vast vault of a cathedral. It was perceived in terms of height not, as for us, distance. 'The medieval world is vertiginous', as C. S. Lewis once wrote.¹⁶

¹³ Initially accepted by the Church, it was only placed on the Index in 1616 when Catholics joined a wave of Protestant opposition in Europe to the heliocentric theory: Grafton, *New Worlds, Ancient Texts*, 112–115.

¹⁴ See Victor Navarro Brotóns, 'The Reception of Copernicus in Sixteenth-Century Spain: The Case of Diego de Zúñiga', *Isis*, 86/1 (March, 1995), 52–55.

¹⁵ Cameron, 'The Power of the Word', 81.

¹⁶ C. S. Lewis, *The Discarded Image: An Introduction to Medieval and Renaissance Literature* (Cambridge: CUP, 1964), 98.

Did Ignatius experience a sense of vertigo when he gazed at the stars from his balcony? What was it like for him to contemplate, high above him, the threshold of heaven itself which, in the influential imagery of Dante, 'has no "where" other than the mind of God. The love that makes it turn is kindled there, so, too, the powers it rains. Brightness and love contain it in one ring.'¹⁷ His place in the cosmos felt quite different, in a real and spatial sense, from how we might experience our own. The heights of the heavenly spheres above him were vast, but not infinitely vast, distances away. Where we might lose ourselves in the unimaginable dimensions of the ever-expanding universe, Ignatius' cosmos was much more stable, intimate and less perplexing. As the medievalist Lewis put it:

The 'space' of modern astronomy may arouse terror, or bewilderment or vague reverie: the spheres of the old present us with an object in which the mind can rest, overwhelming in its greatness but satisfying in its harmony.¹⁸

What light does all this cast upon Ignatius' 'greatest consolation' and delight in spending long hours gazing heavenwards? For him this was no mere metaphor. His gaze took him upwards to the visible, finite limits of the universe, beyond which, he knew, was the throne of His Divine Majesty. It is hard for us to imagine what that experience must have felt like.

It is perhaps worth returning to the striking words attributed to Ignatius by Ribadeneira: 'Oh, how vile and low the earth seems to me! When I look at the sky, it is manure and garbage.'¹⁹ On first sight, they might seem difficult to reconcile with the Ignatius many of us claim to know and even love. The man who learnt to see and serve God in all things discarding the earth as sordid rubbish? Perhaps, on further reflection, we might come to see his heartfelt

¹⁷ Dante, *Paradiso*, canto 27, 109–112, in *The Divine Comedy*, translated by Robin Kirkpatrick (London: Penguin, 2012).

¹⁸ Lewis, *Discarded Image*, 99.

¹⁹ Though it has gone out of style today, this was once one of Ignatius' better known catchphrases, often appearing, with some variation, via the abbreviated Latin version of Ribadeneira's text: 'Heuquam sordet terra cum coelum aspicio!' ('Alas, how sordid is the earth when I look at the sky!'). It appears frequently in pious nineteenth-century literature and is referenced in Tellechea Idígoras, *Ignatius of Loyola*, 149.

exclamation as reflecting something of what was expressed by St Paul in Philippians 3:8—next to Christ all else was worthless. But there is something else going on here as well and though we might recoil at it, we should not explain away as mere hyperbole: the Augustinian or dualistic overtones that were also ingredients in Ignatius' imaginative universe.

In Ribadeneira's reading of Ignatius' stargazing, the contemplation of God's goodness and beauty in the heavens above—the realm of unchanging perfection—put into stark contrast his own smallness and sinfulness as an earthly creature below, confined to the sublunar realm of impermanence and imperfection. He would look attentively at the night sky for so long:

... because its external appearance, and the consideration of what is within the heavens and above them, was a great stimulus and incentive to him to disdain all the transitory and changeable things that are below them, and inflamed more his love for God.²⁰

How do we reconcile and hold in tension these different dimensions of Ignatius in our imagination? The world-spurning and heaven-seeking with his deeply embodied, incarnational spirituality? Somehow we need to hold this strange, old cosmological dimension in place alongside Ignatius' mysticism and profound awareness of the immanence of God in creation—the God who caused him to weep tears of delight and consolation. After all, Ignatius was a sixteenth-century mystic who was able to hold these in tension himself, even if we might struggle to. His cosmology may even have been a help to contemplation rather than a hindrance, as we moderns tend rather arrogantly to assume. For all its absolute and morally charged 'ups' and 'downs', his was a spiritually soaked universe that was fundamentally orientated towards heaven.

This brings us lastly to another piece of mental furniture that Ignatius would have carried around with him, probably unconsciously: the ancient theory of 'sympathies' and 'antipathies'.

²⁰ MHSJ FN 4, 95.

Everything in the medieval universe—whether spiritual or physical—had its rightful place and naturally inclined to it, was drawn to it, by a sort of homing instinct. Since the soul came from heaven, our desire for God and godliness was simply a natural inclination of like for like, kind for kind: one thing being drawn back to its rightful place almost as if by magnetic force. Our restless hearts longed for their resting place in God, as Augustine expressed it.

What applied to the human soul equally applied to the physical universe, including the heavenly bodies, and vice versa; the language of ‘drawn’ and ‘desire’ could be employed in a non-figurative sense for both. In this world-view, as C. S. Lewis expresses it, there was ‘continuity between merely physical events [in our eyes] and our most spiritual aspirations’.²¹ Dante was not just being poetic when he ended his *Paradiso* by describing how ‘my will and my desire were turned, as wheels that move in equilibrium, by love that moves the sun and the other stars’.²²

In Ignatius’ day, long before Newton and the theory of gravity, there was no sense of reality being governed by mathematical laws: *love* was the driving force of the universe. While this may be a leap of faith for a modern—a spiritual or mystical insight into the heart of reality—for Ignatius it was also a self-evident scientific fact. What else but the love of God could attract and move objects even as large as the sun: the same love that drew and moved him. The stars that Ignatius gazed on were no mere balls of gas, but God-created, God-desiring spirits: fellow creatures, as St Francis would have recognised them also, with a character and charism of their own.

What do we make of this stargazing Ignatius? When we add some of the foreignness, the strangeness, back onto his looking at the stars, their place in his imagination takes on a different dimension from what we might at first expect. The question, perhaps, for us is: do such differences discourage or enliven our own imaginative engagement with Ignatius and the stars?

As Ignatius reminisced to da Câmara, ‘the greatest consolation he used to receive was to look at the sky and the stars, which he did often and for a long time, because with this he used to feel in himself

²¹ Lewis, *Discarded Image*, 94.

²² Dante, *Paradiso*, canto 23, 143–145.

a great impetus towards serving Our Lord' (*Autobiography*, n.11). Was this 'impetus', we might wonder, recognised by him as a natural inclining of his soul? The same love that moved the stars was moving him heavenwards, homewards, inflaming his heart and drawing him on in reciprocal love to the greater glory of God: the origin and destination of his soul. As Ignatius looked up at the sky and wept, he knew that what lay behind and beyond his vision was the source that drew both him and the stars ever onwards, from where 'all that is good and every gift descends from on high' (Exx 237). The motions of the heavenly bodies and the interior motions he felt in his own body were not unrelated but macro- and microcosmic levels of the same phenomenon: the drawing of the creature home to its loving Creator.

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