

## **PERSONAL DISCERNMENT AND DIALOGUE. LEARNING FROM 'THE OTHER'.**

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**Abstract.** This article considers the theme of discernment in the tradition of Ignatian spirituality emanating from the *Spiritual Exercises* of St Ignatius of Loyola (1491–1556), the founder of the Society of Jesus (Jesuits). After a brief introduction which addresses the central problematic of bad influences that manifest themselves as good, the article turns to the life and work of two Jesuits, the 16<sup>th</sup> C English missionary to India, Thomas Stephens and the 20<sup>th</sup> C French historian and cultural critic, Michel de Certeau. Both kept up a constant dialogue with local culture in which they sought authenticity in their response to 'events', whether a hideous massacre which shaped the pastoral commitment and writing of Stephens in the south of the Portuguese enclave of Goa or the 1968 student-led protests in Paris that so much affected the thinking of de Certeau. Very different in terms of personal background and contemporary experience, they both share in a tradition of discernment as a virtuous response to what both would understand as the 'wisdom of the Spirit' revealed in their personal interactions with 'the other'.

### **I. INTRODUCTION**

Discernment, says the British Jesuit Michael Ivens, is a 'function of the wisdom of the Spirit'. The basic dynamic of testing spiritual influences is as old as Christianity itself. In the Epistle to the Romans, for example, Paul agonises over the fate of his fellow-Jews, ending with an amazing outburst about the 'depths of the riches and wisdom and knowledge of God' (Rom 11.33). He then comes down to earth and exhorts the community:

By the grace given to me, I bid everyone among you not to think of himself more highly than is appropriate but instead to adopt a sober attitude of mind, each according to the measure which God has assigned at the moment of coming to faith (Rom 12.3).

Paul is not talking here about faith as some special revelation, such as he had experienced at Damascus. On the contrary, in making a complicated play on the root word *phron*—to think—he is commending *sophrosune*, not a distinctively Christian quality but a 'sober attitude of mind', a virtue of moderation that was familiar in the Hellenistic world—not least in Plato and Aristotle. The chapter later develops a more distinctively Christian dimension when Paul insists on a measured response to the way the members of the community are each to perceive how God has bestowed gifts upon them individually. Good discernment begins with that self-acceptance before God that refuses to hanker after what has been given to someone else but accepts and rejoices in the gift that has been bestowed on each one for the sake of the wider community.

That may be a typically Pauline approach to discernment but it also has a contemporary resonance. Today we tend to think of discernment as bound up with moral choices, weighing up the balance of goods, deciding between the better and the worse option, avoiding the possibility of harm or violence. Careful discernment is necessary because judgment is clouded by the inequalities and asymmetries that dog our lives and by the unexpected tragedies that suddenly shatter them. All of that is central to the 'wisdom of the Spirit'—even if the language we use may have changed.

That is not, however, to dismiss Paul's exhortations as so bound up with a particular religious world-view as to be positively unhelpful in a secular age. Paul is making a point that is perennially valid. A 'sober attitude' may be glossed as prudence, care or caution, but it also connotes an attitude of personal responsibility for 'the other'. Discernment is not just about dealing with discrete dilemmas and crises. Without proper attention to the broader network of human relations on to which such existential moments are mapped, my manner of speaking and acting risks being self-referential rather than other-directed.

## II. THE SPIRITUALITY OF ST IGNATIUS

In this article I want to explore one aspect of that map through the experience of Michael Ivens' religious order, the Society of Jesus. In his little book of *Spiritual Exercises*, St Ignatius of Loyola, the founder of the Society, presents a number of 'Rules for the Discernment of Spirits'.<sup>1</sup> They continue to provide the ascetical framework for the spiritual lives of many Christians (and indeed non-Christians). But Ignatius is also addressing a more contemporary question. His context is, of course, Christian mission and the Rules may be regarded as the sedimentation of the call to Christian discipleship that runs through the series of meditations and contemplations that give the text its sense of direction. Without this dynamic, the 'wisdom of the Spirit' would amount to little more than a collection of sage advice for the searcher after truth.

More is at stake. Discernment is about the management and clarification of a fundamental conversion of heart. It grows out of a contemplative sensitivity to the Spirit of God ordering movements of what Ignatius calls consolation and desolation, movements of gladness, joy and peace, and contrary feelings of distress and sadness. Essentially such feelings are reactions to the experience of good and evil manifested in the individual's soul as well as in the history of human relations and the world as a whole. The *Spiritual Exercises* are full of images of spiritual warfare in which what Ignatius calls the 'enemy of our human nature' seeks increasingly devious ways to seduce the well-intentioned disciple away from their declared purpose. He himself knew from his own experience how 'the enemy' is a master of deception whose purpose is to produce a counterfeit sense of well-being, to disguise the morally dubious as the entirely plausible. What we take for certainty may be a diabolical plot — as that celebrated Jesuit pupil, René Descartes, knew so well.

For Ignatius himself the firm foundations for an ordered life depend not on a surfeit of introspective analysis which would paint the world in black and white, but on a constant attention to a shifting landscape shot through with shades of grey. Ignatius was, of course, a convinced theist for whom 'God our Lord', the 'Divine Majesty', is never to be separated from the person of Christ who offers himself for the 'salvation of souls'. But he is also a supreme realist; while his theology of divine presence is only ever implicit in the practical unfolding of ways of prayer, the Trinitarian God 'works and labours on my behalf in all created things on the face of the earth'.<sup>2</sup> Against that backdrop how do we human beings gain a clear and balanced sense of self in our relations not just with God but with other human beings and the world we share?

In addressing that question I turn to two Jesuits, far apart historically and working in totally different contexts, yet sharing a similar vision of a sin-filled world that is yet shot through with the abundance of divine grace. One belongs to that first flowering of the Society in 16th C post-Reformation Europe: Thomas Stephens, the first English Jesuit in India, the fourth centenary of whose death was celebrated in 2019. The other is more contemporary and has claims to be one of the most influential voices in the dialogue of contemporary religious and secular culture: Michel de Certeau, who died in 1986. Stephens was born in 1549 in rural Wiltshire, joined the Society in Rome in 1575, and as a Jesuit might have expected

1 There are two sets: paragraphs 313–27, entitled (in Ivens' translation) 'rules by which to perceive and understand to some extent the various movements produced in the soul', and 328–36, 'rules for the same purpose, serving for a more advanced discernment of spirits'. The first set is regarded as more suitable for the 'first week' of the Exercises; the second set for the 'second week'. (Michael Ivens, *Understanding the Spiritual Exercises: Text and Commentary: A Handbook for Retreat Directors* (Gracewing, 1998)).

2 Ex 236 — the second point of the final exercise, the Contemplation to Attain Love, which according to Ivens 'presents in the form of a contemplative paradigm the spirituality of finding and loving God in all things which is the lasting outcome of the Exercises'. (Ibid, 169).

to come back to his home country alongside St Edmund Campion and other Englishmen to minister to a persecuted Catholic community. Instead he answered a very different call. I take him as an example of that early Jesuit fascination with the humanist culture of the Renaissance which sent idealistic young men on heroic voyages to preach the Christian gospel and to learn about the ways of God in strange and distant parts. De Certeau, theologian and historian of mysticism, was born in Savoie in 1925. A ‘Renaissance man’ de nos jours, he was radicalised by the student uprising in Paris in 1968, shifting his scholarly focus from the spirituality of the early Society of Jesus to psycho-therapy learned from a close reading of Lacan. A voracious reader and precise writer, never seen without a book in his hands, like Stephens he was fascinated by language and culture.

Stephens and de Certeau had different experiences of that fuzzy grey area where the realms of good and evil rub up against each other. What they shared was a grounding in a well-crafted intelligent pedagogy for discernment that builds sound virtues of human living, encouraging the wisdom that grows from a careful scrutiny of experience. The main part of this article will be concerned with Stephens’ experience as a missionary in India and his extraordinary book, the *Kristapurana*, a retelling of the biblical narrative in Marathi. I will then bring Stephens into a brief dialogue with de Certeau in order to focus on their common religious sensibility, a deep awareness of the areas of darkness and light that always cloud human interaction.

### III. MISSION AND VIOLENCE

Not long after his ordination Stephens was sent to Salcete, the southern-most part of the Portuguese enclave. According to Georg Schurhammer, Salcete then had a population of some 80,000, scattered over fifty-five villages; scores of temples were dedicated to Santery, the cobra-goddess, a form of the fearsome Durga.<sup>3</sup> In 1560 there were about 100 Christians; by the end of the decade over a thousand. This rapid expansion was achieved in no small measure by force, with the destruction of Hindu temples. Almost inevitably there was a violent reaction and in 1583 four Jesuits and forty-eight native Christians, were attacked and violently hacked to death at a small outpost called Cuncolim. Today the site of the massacre is covered by an innocuous little chapel. Together with another chapel a couple of hundred yards away, which covers the ‘well’ where the dismembered bodies were dumped, it has become a place of pilgrimage.

When I visited the site I found no great monument to Catholic martyrs. I was struck, however, by a more recent memorial to another massacre set up in a garden on the other side of the dividing wall. My guides were not able to tell me what precisely is being recorded here. But the date is important: the same year, 1583, a reminder that it wasn’t just Catholics who suffered violence at that time. However, religious difference is never the whole story in inter-communal conflict — maybe not even the central part of the story. The economic and political consequences of disruption of the cultural status quo are often a significant issue. The Jesuit historian Teutonio de Souza criticises recourse to easy theological tropes, such as the assumption that the ‘natives’ were implicated in ‘the work of the devil’ while those who supported the missionaries were doing ‘God’s work.’<sup>4</sup> At any rate, however this tragic story is to be dissected, it was, says Schurhammer, a ‘major disaster.’<sup>5</sup> Stephens, recently installed as Rector of the ‘college’ or Jesuit community in Rachol, was caught in the aftermath. It fell to him to recover the bodies — one of them a fellow-novice from Roman days — and then go about the painful business of rebuilding the community’s work.

Undoubtedly this early experience marked Stephens for the rest of his life. By strange chance, two months later Stephens received a letter from his brother Richard, telling him of the martyrdom of Edmund Campion and his companions at Tyburn. In his reply, written just four years after his arrival in India, 24<sup>th</sup> October 1583, Stephens gives a graphic description of what happened in Cuncolim. He then

3 Georg Schurhammer, “Thomas Stephens 1549–1619”, *The Month* (April 1955).

4 Teotónio R. de Souza, “Why Cuncolim Martyrs: An Historical Re-assessment”, in *Jesuits in India: In Historical Perspective*, ed. Teotónio R. de Souza (Inst. Cultural de Macau, 1992).

5 Schurhammer, “Thomas Stephens 1549–1619”, 202.

passes on a happier story about the strength of faith of a Brahmin boy who was imprisoned by his family yet resisted all attempts to make him give up his Christian faith. The story is not a pious aside, intended to counter the traumas of Tyburn and Cuncolim. Stephens notes the importance of freedom and the time it takes for truth to take hold in the heart.<sup>6</sup> Anantya Chakravarti, author of a dispassionate analysis of Stephens' life and mission, draws attention to his 'willingness to impute reasonable motivations and sentiments to the people of his adopted land'. His awareness of the seeds of violence, how violence can beget violence, built up in him, she says, not resentment but a remarkable capacity for empathy.<sup>7</sup>

Stephens spent most of his forty years on the Indian mission in Salcete. By the time of his death in 1619 the peninsula had become a wholly Christian land, this amazing success, says Schurhammer, being due, 'under God's blessing, to the small band of Jesuit missionaries working in this field and, pre-eminently, to the indefatigable labours of our "Padre Estevam"'<sup>8</sup> The first half of his forty years in India was spent in pastoral work. He was clearly a dedicated and sensitive priest. The labour of administration came less easily to him. All the time he was conscious of the danger of keeping a superficial control of the mission, and avoiding the need to enter ever more deeply into the local culture.

#### IV. THE KRISTAPURANA: SCRIPTURE AND CATECHESIS

Once he had mastered Sanskrit, he found himself captivated by the writing of the Maratha poets, Jñanesvar, Eknath, and Tukaram, convinced that no better language could be imagined for communicating in India of the truth of the Gospel. Three editions of the *Kristapurana* were published, in 1616, 1649 and 1654. A scholarly edition was published in Mangalore by Joseph Saldanha in 1907 and English speakers are indebted to the more recent translation by Nelson Falcao published in 2012.<sup>9</sup> What brought Stephens to write this great text? And how should it be read?

Although written in the style of Hindu devotional mythology, the *Kristapurana* is much more than a translation of the Christian 'ancient story' in a new form. In Rachol Stephens found himself in conversation with brahmin converts who were concerned their new-found faith lacked the cultural and liturgical structures they had been so used to. Stephens therefore took the puranic model and began to think in terms of an accompaniment to the catechism, a story to be recited and prayed, raising questions and opening up elucidations of the truth of the Gospel. To that extent, his not so remote model was St Francis Xavier, the first and greatest of Jesuit missionaries. Xavier learned enough of the local language to produce simple summaries which he repeated to people. More importantly, in the spirit of the Spiritual Exercises, he taught them how to pray. In centring the words of faith round the life of Christ they would come to understand — and relish — its deeper truth.

Thus in a letter to the General, from 1601, Stephens writes about 'the little chapels which Fr Provincial ordered to be erected in remote villages. Here the children can gather to study their catechism and the people can stop to pray when passing by.'<sup>10</sup> At the same time it would be misleading to suggest that the text is purely a liturgical accompaniment, still less a by rote repetition. Cut in to the story are questions from an enquiring Brahmin or 'an intelligent person' which enable the teacher to develop further the meaning of what has happened. Both at an intellectual and affective level a carefully considered building up of the local community acts as background to what became the major achievement of the latter part of Stephens' life in India.

6 Nelson Falcao, *Kristapurana* (Kristu Jyoti Publications, 2012); Appendix 9; 1664–70.

7 Anantya Chakravarti, "Christ in the Brahmapuri: Thomas Stephens in Salcete", in *The Empire of Apostles: Religion, Accommodatio and The Imagination of Empire in Modern Brazil and India*, ed. Anantya Chakravarti (Oxford Univ. Press, 2018), 178–227.

8 Schurhammer, "Thomas Stephens 1549–1619", 204.

9 As well as background material and notes, Falcao presents the text in columns, the Marathi (in Roman script) and his English verse translation facing each other. He also gives us something of the textual tradition, insofar as that can be reconstructed.

10 Falcao, *Kristapurana*, Appendix 10; 1671–3.

The Kristapurana can therefore be read as a version of the biblical narrative shaped by the imaginative intent of the gifted teacher. Apart from the obvious influence of the Spiritual Exercises, we should not forget the one text that Ignatius allows his retreatant — The Imitation of Christ. Stephens' novice-director, Fabio de Fabi, refers in his Directory to the 'hidden power' of the Exercises, 'grounded as they are in the teaching of the saints, the truth of scripture, and long experience'.<sup>11</sup> The Kristapurana is undoubtedly a remarkable work of the Christian imagination but that is not to ignore the power of a tradition of devotional literature that, in good Ignatian fashion, seeks to bring all the senses into a single whole-hearted response to the love of God poured out for humankind in Christ. While it is clear that Stephens' carefully wrought poetry is intended to appeal to the heart, he begins — and never loses touch with — the overarching truths and principles of Christian faith. This is no nod in the direction of 'popular religion'; it is a sophisticated and highly effective catechesis.

The first part of the text, about a third of the whole, is less the story of Israel than a single lengthy meditation on the coming of Christ as Saviour into a world darkened by sin. It is remarkably full, beginning with the rebellion of the angels and ending with predictions of the coming of Christ from Jewish prophets and Roman sybils alike. After opening, in the manner of the classical Purana form, with praise of God, a teacher is introduced who is asked to fulfill the desires of the devotees by speaking to them from scriptures they can understand.

Part Two — the Gospel narrative — begins with an invocation to God to enable the teacher to tell the story of Christ worthily. The 'history' of the Incarnation is told by Ignatius in the Spiritual Exercises in a famously naïve meditation in which the three persons of the Trinity are depicted looking down on the world, watching how people are in a pretty sorry state. They decide that the Second Person should become incarnate in order to save the world from utter perdition. The niceties of Trinitarian theology are not Ignatius's strong point; one somehow gets the impression that the Holy Spirit is left to keep an eye on things from afar. Stephens does a little better. His pneumatology is limited to a sort of secondary dimension of Christ's divine nature. But at least it acts as a reminder that in the work of salvation it is the entire Trinity that is involved. Human beings are invited to share in the inner life of the Godhead, the relationship of love which defines the unity of the three persons.

Lord, your Word, full of grace from heaven came into the world from heaven, all of a sudden from the throne of grace of the King.

Along with him came the blessed Holy Spirit, the third person of the Trinity, just like the Father, the Son in respect of Godhead, God in person, God himself. ...

And with that [Mary's fiat], one excellent and pure Spirit was created and entered in one body and the Second Person of the Trinity, the Son of God.

He who along with Father and Holy Spirit, like God himself took the Spirit along with the body for himself.<sup>12</sup>

## V. DEMANDS OF COSMIC JUSTICE

If there is one key theme that underlies Indian religion it is that of cosmic justice, the dilemmas of pursuing dharma, the cause of right, in a less than perfect world. In the Epic and Puranic literature it is played out as an endless battle between the personalised forces of good and evil. Very often the god-figures, appearing in human or animal form, use their superior powers, often gained through acts of asceticism, to overcome the wiles of the demons. This is the basic framework with which Stephens works. We get the flavour from his magnificent rendering of the Temptations of Jesus.

11 Directory of Father Fabio de Fabi in Ignatius and Martin E. Palmer, *On Giving the Spiritual Exercises: The Early Jesuit Manuscript Directories and the Official Directory of 1599* (Institute of Jesuit Sources, 1996), 197.

12 Part Two, Prasanga/Chapter 5; 67–8, 70–2; 650–1.

Inside the hollow dome of the sky, the servants of Lucifer were talking. ‘Who is that dwelling, dressed like an ascetic, in the forest? ... He is definitely the enemy. Now let us alert our king.’

While they were talking, the messengers said to Lucifer; ‘O King, why are you still sitting quietly? ... We have seen a wonderful thing, a man has come suddenly leaping from the town of Nazareth.

‘We have seen him from far off but we dared not go close to him. His name alone is terror for all the devils.’

Upon hearing this, Lucifer trembled with great anger, as if fire was stirred up by sprinkling ghee on it.

Or like a cobra when it is put in a bamboo box ... great wrath provoked him; from his nose, mouth, ears and out of all the organs, fireballs rushed and showered forth.

As a fierce rocket, when it is burst, it shakes a lot and looks as if there is no end to its fire ... in the same way the fierce tormentor was greatly wrathful. At the place of hell, on the throne of fire he raged upon the chains as he shouted.<sup>13</sup>

This Lucifer dominates the minor demons with his bluster and bullying and they follow him because of their ‘pride and vanity’. But when he comes close to Jesus he covers up his ‘ghastly appearance’ and takes the form of an old man. This is Stephens’ version not of classical Hinduism but of the recurrent Ignatian trope of the evil spirit who appears as an ‘angel of light’, producing a counterfeit sense of well-being. What we take for peace and contentment may turn out on closer inspection to be a self-interested satisfaction or a lazy complacency. As Stephens tells the story, it is Jesus who beats the devil at his own game, allowing himself to get close to the demon in order to destroy him ‘stealthily’. This gives Stephens the opportunity to introduce a familiar patristic image:

As a fisherman puts bait of flesh in the mouth of fish, and when the hook is seized, he draws it up and takes his life, so the Lord whose wisdom is deep, allowed his human form to be carried, to vanquish the wicked one by the power of his Divine Nature.<sup>14</sup>

This theological motif of the Divine entering deep into a world terrorised by the demonic runs through much of Stephens’ narrative. The detailed narration of the Passion narrative links the familiar prophecies with not so familiar outbursts of praise and wonder set in terms of a great battle with the forces of darkness. What is striking, however, is not the acres of devotional rhetoric but the stillness of the central figure who is never a hapless victim, the one who somehow perseveres through pain and suffering until somehow, miraculously, he comes out victorious the other side — and all is well again. This Jesus is always in control, confronting rather than simply absorbing violence until, as if by magic, the tables are turned. When the comforting angel leaves, Jesus is portrayed as the lonely hero waiting patiently for what is to come.

‘In the meantime, Lord the Son of God, both his arms raised and spread out, the Saviour looked skywards and walked the garden.

Pacing here and there he whiled away the time. “When will Judas come?” as he thought in his mind.

As the brave warrior, general of an army, looks at his enemy coming, with a force to fight with him, hears the sound of battle drums, sees the banners and pennants flying, his arms quivering to fight, eagerly awaits,

Likewise the fighter of death taking aim, the destroyer of sin and Satan, the Son of God sought to enter battle, waiting for Judas to come.<sup>15</sup>

The Kristapurana is a masterpiece of religious story-telling and a remarkable piece of cross-cultural communication. I read it in the first place as a lengthy exercise in Ignatian imaginative contemplation, a vivid variation on the meditation on the Incarnation and the constant directive to look at the ‘history’, as set

13 Part Two; Prasanga/Chapter 20; 16–30; 843–44.

14 Part Two; Prasanga/Chapter 20; 66–67; 849.

15 Part Two; Prasanga/Chapter 44; 234–8; 1271–2.

out in the scriptural narrative. This is what becomes possible when the Word of God is taken seriously as an invitation to listen deeply to what God contemplates and goes on saying in the middle of our world. Schooled in the Spiritual Exercises and familiar with Ignatius's constant injunction to take seriously the subtle power of 'the enemy', Stephens was no doubt well able to respond to much he found in this world. He would have listened to the rituals and devotions of the people of Salcete, but that is not to say he would have failed to spot areas of discord, where his own vision of Christian faith jarred with what he found in the local religious culture.

In his retelling of the biblical stories there is more going on than a clothing of the familiar Christian imaginary with Hindu symbolism to produce a well-wrought bit of Christian propaganda. Let me return to that historian's comment made earlier with regard to Cuncolim. Are the Christian and Hindu meta-narratives to be considered as no more than alternative versions of a straight binary confrontation between 'the work of the devil' and 'God's work'? There's a dispassionate side to Stephens' flights of fancy which always come back to the basic truths of human nature and Ignatius's insight that what we take for the good is often a construction by an 'angel of light'. It would be surprising if Stephens was not haunted throughout his life by what happened at Cuncolim. And maybe that is the reason this extraordinary text is characterised by a lack of polemic. There are plenty of enemies and they get their comeuppance, but they are simply more or less culpable versions of Satan — and it is the unmasking of Satan, naming evil for what it is, that most concerns Stephens. The story is allowed to speak for itself, with the occasional addition of well-reasoned commentary — the questions raised by the 'intelligent person'. (Perhaps one of his Rachol brahmin converts?).

This is what Stephens says by way of self-justification in his introduction to the Kristapurana.

No efforts whatsoever have been made in this Purana to prove that their sacred book is untrue and false, and our sacred book is true and real. The difference and the distinctness between the two automatically becomes evident to all. The sacred book of the Christians emerges as beautiful of its own accord. ... If you read or listen to this sacred book, it would be enough. It will promote proper understanding of everything.<sup>16</sup>

It is not that he seeks some sort of synthesis of Hindu and Christian thought, nor even a fulfillment of the one through the other. The story he tells stands on its own merits; its truth does not have to be proved by subtle arguments which exist apart from that story. Rather scripture creates a religious world — and by entering into that world, with all its colour and symbolism, beauty and aesthetic power, one acquires a language which structures and interprets that world. In the hands of a master story-teller like Stephens, scripture is not a script to be read but more the basis for endless improvisations and imaginative developments.

In other words there is more to story-telling in this culture than repeating the form. It is a performance. In an important sense the storyteller as well as the story itself is 'performed'. It is not just the text that has to be translated. The story-teller has to become the translation, not the medium who passes on the story but its very embodiment. This is what led other celebrated Jesuit missionaries, such as Roberto de Nobili in India and Matteo Ricci in China, to change their dress, manner of life and customs of social interaction. What they were doing was adopting an ancient Pauline principle, to 'become all things to all men'. Yet this, quite clearly, is not unproblematic. Careful discernment is needed if the revelation of the Gospel is to reinvigorate another culture rather than being subsumed into it. It is all too easy to let a fixation on the self, on the way I present myself outwardly to the other, to dominate and subtly manipulate a free response.

## VI. THE VOICE OF THE OTHER

This is something Michel de Certeau knew well. His own 'Cuncolim moment' was less bloody and violent than what the gentle Stephens experienced but les événements of Paris 1968 were in their own way trau-

<sup>16</sup> Falcao, *Kristapurana*, Prose Introduction, xci.

matic and life-changing. He shares with Stephens an extraordinary curiosity about the battle that goes on in human culture, and in human hearts, between the forces of light and the forces of darkness. Stephens, of course, is formed in his thinking by the wisdom he finds in the great puranas while de Certeau's reading of the human condition owes much to his work on Christian mysticism and the psychotherapeutic theories of Freud and Lacan. Like Stephens he joined the Society of Jesus intending to be a missionary, to travel to 'diverse places'. But his personal journey quickly became interiorised, transformed into a fascination not with particular places but with a world that is already criss-crossed by the marks of the human activity of cultivation, themselves the remote traces of that unruly human desire to experience, to know — and to disturb.

Both Stephens and de Certeau faced similar problems about discernment and dialogue. How not to turn the other, the strictly unknown, into an object to be comprehended, to be reduced to something manageable within the ambit of the known? How in any act of communication — sharing ideas and convictions, hopes and aspirations — to avoid doing violence to the other?

Both begin from the same point, a principle known as the 'Presupposition' which underpins the intellectual asceticism of the Spiritual Exercises. Ignatius does not use the word dialogue but he presumes upon the practice of an empathetic listening in which one should be prepared to put a good rather than a bad interpretation on the words of another. The words themselves may be halting and inadequate but they express an inner truth, and as such are to be respected as outer signs of a God-given human dignity. The temptation is to suppress the voice of the other, to win the war of words, if not by bullying and bluster, then by subtle argument and clever dialectic. Stephens' experience of Cuncolim convinced him that another way had to be found to communicate the truth of the Gospel than the forceful eradication of culture. For de Certeau, one of the most influential exponents of contemporary post-modern thought, the dominating resistance of the other, a voice that demands to be heard, puts the dominating self radically into question. Ignatius's presupposition, originally intended to guide the spiritual conversation that brings the Gospel narrative and the Word of God alive, runs through every example of Jesuit missionary endeavour, from St Francis Xavier in India and Japan to another Francis, the Jesuit pope in regular speeches and exhortations of all kinds.

No more than his 16th C counterpart does de Certeau replace the task of communication, speaking truth before the world, with a vague relativism. It's the hidden forces in what Stephens following Ignatius depicted as a 'great battle' that occupy his attention; human beings are caught into a fuzzy 'greyness' that appears at once plausible and dangerous, intriguing yet risky. Although not involved in interreligious relations, except in the most abstract sense, de Certeau does have something important to say about an experience familiar to those of us who are. The 'outsider' and the 'insider' never occupy the same place but they are both implicated in the same space. And at the very moment when the insider thinks they have somehow closed the gap between self and other, the gap mysteriously opens up again. The question gets a response but is not answered; it is simply deferred. Following de Certeau it is tempting to develop an interreligious version of his 'heterological law': if otherness is coerced, otherness will come back in another way.<sup>17</sup>

Not for de Certeau the reassurance of oppositionalist binaries. The 'space' we human beings occupy and seek to negotiate with our 'places' and texts and conversations is more complex and more interesting than that. A keen observer as well as voracious reader, he is trying to understand the 'inner logic' behind the ways in which people identify themselves in their relationship to the environment and each other. 'Everyday life', he says, 'invents itself by poaching in countless ways on the property of others. ... Users make innumerable and infinitesimal transformations of and within the dominant cultural economy in order to adapt it to their own interests and their own rules.'<sup>18</sup> The task is to become sensitised to an 'otherness' that erupts and transforms, a mysterious trace or echo from elsewhere that continually returns to disturb and 'haunt' the everyday present moment.

17 On de Certeau's 'heterological law' I am indebted to Jeremy Ahearne, *Michel de Certeau* (Polity Press, 1995), 21.

18 Michel de Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life* (Univ. of California Press., 1988); xii-xiv.



Something more than pragmatic considerations of effective communication are at stake here. Under the influence of the eruption of the otherness of post-modernity, de Certeau's missionary vocation shifted dramatically from a self-assurance that orders other people's places (if not actually destroy them) to a more humble self-acceptance of where he himself stands, a recognition that he does not know the other and must therefore commit himself to an ever-deepening process of learning. It is this experience of knowing yet not-knowing that is the theme of a remarkable little book by George York, for whom de Certeau was mentor and friend. That personal relationship comes through on every page of what is, in effect, a meditation on a single paragraph from one of de Certeau's early writings.

When we confess our incapacity to know others, we confess simultaneously their existence, our own (to which we are returned) and a fundamental reciprocity between them and us. To the extent we agree not to identify ourselves with anything they can expect from us and not to identify them with satisfactions or assurances we hope to take from them, we discover a sense of the poverty which funds all communication. This poverty signifies in effect both the desire which unites us to others and the difference which separates us from them. The same is the structure of our belief in God.<sup>19</sup>

Discernment here is far removed from a mechanical weighing up of the advantages and disadvantages of particular choices. It is a virtue learned through imbibing the 'wisdom of the Spirit' as God's Word speaks through 'the words' voiced by the other.

## VII. THE TASK OF DISCERNMENT

What does this have to say about the task of discernment in a pluralist, multi-religious world? De Certeau's typically Ignatian sensitivity to the 'enemy of our human nature', makes him aware that 'the other' is not some vaguely defined spiritual reality that can never be pinned down in well-reasoned categories but, more obscurely, a force that resists the drive to control and homogenise human experience. Put like that, it sounds a tad negative. But in de Certeau's view, that experience of encountering resistance has the result not of closing down the possibility of communication but of drawing the self away from the will to dominate while at the same time opening up the possibility of engaging in a never-ending journey which alone makes faith credible. Once we admit our incapacity to know others, once we face the poverty that backs our efforts to communicate, we discover a paradoxical freedom: my curiosity about the other is met and subsumed into the other's curiosity about me.

As I said at the beginning, there is more to discernment than developing rules that can be applied from a lordly height on to situations that are often massively complicated, shot through with trauma and discord — as Thomas Stephens knew so well. In that sense Ignatius's Rules are more like the skills taught in a coaching manual than the laws or code of practice that define how a game is to be played. Separated by nearly 400 years, Stephens and de Certeau are united by an account of discernment not just as a set of habituated practices (however much they are necessary) but as a virtuous activity that characterises men and women capable of mediating between one tradition and another, who know how to practise a principled yet generous hospitality, who can reflect sensitively and critically on its application — and can call out its often misguided moments of sincere yet ill-thought out enthusiasm, the work of 'the enemy'. Communicating truth — the sort of thing Paul is commending to the Church of Rome — is genuine when all pretence to mastery has been overcome within the mutuality that should characterise all human relationships.

<sup>19</sup> Quotation from Desclée de Brouwer, "L'étranger ou l'union dans la différence", in *Michel de Certeau or Union in Difference*, ed. George B. York (Gracewing, 2009); 7.

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