Pacific Rim Report No. 41, June 2006

The Spiritual Exercises of St. Ignatius of Loyola: Comparative Perspectives from Asia and the West
Symposium summary by Pamela Nagashima

We gratefully acknowledge The Kiriyama Chair for Pacific Rim Studies at the USF Center for the Pacific Rim for underwriting the publication of this issue of Pacific Rim Report.

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The University of San Francisco Center for the Pacific Rim presented a one-day symposium on “The Spiritual Exercises of St. Ignatius of Loyola: Comparative Perspectives from Asia and the West” on the occasion of the 150th Anniversary of the University of San Francisco on Friday, March 3, 2006 at USF.

Introductions by Barbara Bundy, Executive Director, USF Center for the Pacific Rim, and John Nelson, Symposium Co-chair and Associate Professor of East Asian Religions, USF Department of Theology and Religious Studies.

Keynote by Francis X. Clooney, SJ, Parkman Professor of Divinity and Professor of Comparative Theology, Harvard Divinity School.
(The handout distributed as part of Fr. Clooney’s talk is available as a PDF file.)

In opening, Dr. Barbara Bundy welcomed speakers and guests and also recognized a special guest in attendance, Tenzin Choegyal, the brother of the Dalai Lama. Discussing the genesis of this symposium, she noted that this year is the 150th anniversary of the founding of the University of San Francisco, the oldest university in the city. In conceptualizing this event, its planners wanted to recognize and locate USF’s history and tradition in a Pacific Rim context. Given the state of the world today and the importance of multicultural and interreligious dialogue, it is fitting to look at the Spiritual Exercises of St. Ignatius in a comparative context in relationship to Buddhism, Islam, and Hinduism.

Cosponsors of the conference included The Ricci Institute, Department of Theology and Religious Studies, The Joan and Ralph Lane Center for Catholic Studies and Catholic Social Thought, the USF Jesuit community, The Interfaith Center of the Presidio, The San Francisco Zen Center, and the Center for Southeast Asian Studies at UC Berkeley. Special thanks were extended to Professor John Nelson and Professor Yoko Arisaka (currently on leave), to Krysten Elbers at the Center for the Pacific Rim and to the student worker, Kristine Arangcon, and May Lee at the Center’s Ricci Institute.

Professor Nelson gave the introduction to the symposium explaining that the organizers were working off of the idea of how this text, the Spiritual Exercises, affirms the potential of humans to cope with the forces that oppose their spiritual development in the world today by discovering paths in service through prayer, contemplation, and direct engagement in life-enhancing activities. With those themes serving as a bridge, the day’s speakers represent Hinduism, Buddhism, Islam, and Christianity as all of these traditions promote ways of being human by engaging in meditation, yoga, prayer, pilgrimage and rituals that empower both individuals and communities. Interreligious dialogue is, perhaps, at the heart of how the 21st century is ever going to be a century of peace and harmony rather than one of bloodshed and conflict.

Introducing the keynote speaker, Francis X. Clooney, Professor Nelson noted Fr. Clooney’s very prolific output of published articles and, referring to his bio, noted especially the commitment that he has had to interreligious dialogue and its promotion in diverse ways. (NOTE: Fr. Clooney’s talk, “Practicing St. Ignatius’s Spiritual Exercises in Asia: Imagination, Certainty, and Insight in Interreligious Encounter” is published as Pacific Rim Report Number 40.)

Panel I: Relevance of the Spiritual Exercises to the Contemporary World

Steven Schloesser, S.J., Chair, LoSchiavo Chair of Catholic Social Thought at USF’s Ralph and Joan Lane Center for Catholic Social Thought and Assistant Professor of History, Boston College
Christopher W. Gowans, Professor of Philosophy, Fordham University
Thomas Lucas, S.J., Associate Professor, USF Visual and Performing Arts Department

Professor Gowans introduced the *Spiritual Exercises* as being, for Ignatius, a set of activities the purpose of which is to free our soul from inordinate attachments and to find the will of God in the disposition of our life. Gowans chose to talk about just two of the many religions with spiritual exercises by presenting a power point on “Divergences and Affinities” between Santideva (from Buddhism) and Ignatius, arriving at the question of whether or not interreligious dialogue itself isn’t a spiritual exercise. Moral psychology, confessions, nonattachment and meditation were some areas of comparison and contrast. Preliminary affinities between the two religious traditions are extensive discussions of desire (in a dualistic framework), use of military metaphors, and envisioning radical transformation, but these comparisons require great effort. One divergence would be that Ignatius promotes an attachment to God as preliminary to love of persons, an action that is an expression of God. For Santideva there is no mediation by God, although the aid of Buddhas and Bodhisattvas is welcome on the route to love of all living beings. However, a kindred movement from love of self to love of others would be another affinity.

Finally, Ignatius’s assertion that we should be more ready to put a good interpretation on another’s statement than to condemn it as false might suggest that persons of other religious faiths may be sources of wisdom. The emphasis he places on “interpretation, imagination, and flexibility” might be redirected to persons of different traditions. And Gowans (projecting on the screen a Chinese postage stamp picturing Ricci, to the appreciation of the audience), suggested that “Ricci’s flexibility could be continued into our own day…as we try to comprehend the perceptions of one another.”

Fr. Lucas introduced himself by saying, “I am an artist” and also “a sometime practitioner of the Exercises.” (He is Director of USF’s Thacher Art Gallery as well as currently serving as the design consultant on the restoration of the Cathedral of St. Ignatius in Shanghai, China.) His caveat is that his approach to Buddhism has been through art, rather than through careful parsing of sacred text. He proposed to “underline not only some of the affinities that have already been alluded to but some of the challenges that need to be addressed honestly” about what the *Spiritual Exercises* are and how they relate to other religions. The major issue for Lucas is the conundrum of the *terminus ad quem,* (translated as the “final or latest limiting point”) based in the riddles of the two rich young men, Ignatius and Siddhartha, and their parallel process toward enlightenment. The question is “What does enlightenment hold?!” For the Buddha, it led to the dharma, for Ignatius to the *Spiritual Exercises.*

The *Spiritual Exercises* are for the person leading the retreat, not for the retreatant. It is not a work of literature or a devotional book, it is a work of process and methodology. It is a religious and cultural artifact, and there is a risk, in inculturating the *Exercises,* of ignoring its Christological/Trinitarian focus in the name of dialogue, ignoring very real teleological differences among religious traditions. In profound contrast to the Buddhist and many other Asian traditions, Ignatius is a sturdy realist in the Aristotelian-Thomist mode. Positively stated, Lucas exhorts us to respect the integrity of the *Exercises* as religious/cultural artifact and methodology and to respect the integrity of host religious and cultural beliefs, structures, and processes.

Panel I: Q & A

A questioner from the audience asked Clooney about what seemed to her a discrepancy between the Catholic church’s PR problem, (that is, how it seems to her as a lapsed secular Lutheran), and how impressed she was with his speech (“Are the Jesuits a radical spearhead?”). She also asked him to expand on the role of women in both the Catholic tradition and in those of the countries being discussed at this symposium.

Clooney repeated that the *Exercises* have to be seen as a product of the Roman Catholic Church and not “overlaid” with a neutral philosophy; it’s very complicated and doesn’t do to make a split between the Jesuits and the church. He emphasized that because the *Exercises* could always be framed in terms of some dogma, conservative or liberal, practitioners must always focus on what comes forth from them personally. He hoped that some of the issues the questioner had mentioned wouldn’t be obstacles to getting started.

A second questioner commented that although the Jesuits had been in Asia for centuries it is now Madison Avenue that has captured hearts and minds there, convincing these countries that the people there should live western lives, have western lifestyles and western values. Lucas mentioned his work on the restoration of the Ignatian church in Shanghai, close by one of the largest shopping centers he has ever seen. More frightening to him than the loss of traditional religions in China is the rampant secularism there and how much they have embraced everything bad about our culture.

Clooney agreed that the practice of the traditional religions has become counter-cultural and resistant to this “infatuation,” and the levels of dialogue between the practitioners of the different positions indicate we need to find a way to have a more multicultural conversation.

Gowans, acknowledging particularly the cities in China, thinks that people will always come back to traditions and so the task is to try to show people there is something to come back to, and to keep that alive.

A third questioner, who is “trying to survive the Silicon Valley culture,” asked in what way these traditions say something to a highly technical culture (such as in this area) and specifically how we are changing as human beings because of the emergence of new technology. How do the *Exercises* speak to this?

Clooney said the Jesuit tradition had always tried to keep up with where education and technology and knowledge are in its time, but that simply presenting the *Exercises* to Silicon Valley is too retrograde. We have to be able to show a more complex, multi-dimensional possibility of entering the spiritual realm.
Lucas said we are not talking about evangelization here, and we are not talking about the means to get thinking people to do the *Exercises*, but to think about meanings and values in their lives—Ignatius didn’t give the *Exercises* to everyone in their full form.

Gowan pointed out that, as was clear from his power point presentation, he has no objection to technology; he even owns an iPod. That we are living in a fast-changing world has to be addressed, but the themes he discussed in that power point don’t change. He doesn’t think human life is any different than it ever was.

The final questioner asked about how the Jesuits practicing the *Exercises* would “go only so far” and then fall back into an orthodoxy that Clooney referred to. Did this have to do ultimately with their being “missioned”? Was this “stopping” part of the practice of the *Exercises* by the people in those particular contexts and, if so, what does that say about our practice now?

Clooney said that indeed he was saying that there is a context of Jesuit life that did not give permission to be whatever you wanted to be, but it is never completely articulated what the *Exercises* mean and so they are in danger of being co-opted by another ideology and that is, in fact, the genius of the *Exercises*.

The questioner asked how we today stay faithful to the *Exercises* in our current contexts.

Clooney said that the indeterminacy of the *Exercises* could be a great advantage.

Lucas said one has to be careful not to be anachronistic and “read back” and expect that people in the 1600s thought the same as we do now. One has to remember the evolution of the *Exercises*, from an informal beginning to codification, and how despite having left some “elbow room” the *Exercises* are Christian artifacts.

Panel II: Comparative Perspectives on Spiritual Discipline and Practice in the Asia Pacific Region

Reverend **Victoria Austin**, former President, San Francisco Zen Center

**Vijaya Nagarajan**, Associate Professor, USF Department of Theology and Religious Studies

**Reza Aslan**, Ph.D. candidate in History of Religions/ Global Studies, UC Santa Barbara

**“Buddhist Practices and Spiritual Discipline”**

Rev. Austin began with the practice of placing hands together to acknowledge the divinity in everyone, indicating the different placements of the hands in different traditions (at the heart, at the face…) After hearing the previous speakers, she decided to discard her carefully prepared notes and speak extemporaneously about the practices that are shared by traditions, reflecting her opening concerns, with respect to today’s topic, about what is able to be said in words, what is nameable. She began with Buddha nature: an awakening being. We don’t all *have* Buddha nature, we *all are* Buddha nature. “No person is who or what we think they are. They’re bigger than that, not nameable as what we perceive.” This conference is important because, given the state of the world, “We do not have the luxury of misusing our time together.” In addition to citing some parables, Austin recited the 16 Precepts of Zen (she is an ordained priest in the Soto Zen lineage begun by Dōgen), and discussed *upeksha*, “special use of ordinary activity” or “indifference/disgust”, a kind of aversion therapy accomplished by sitting with truths about small-mindedness. We give up our attachment of a fixed idea of a permanent, unchanging self. “I think that St. Ignatius would agree that souls are capable of transformation,” she summed up, before concluding with a discussion of karma and over attachment to ideas of “good” and “bad.”

**“Islam in Southeast Asia: Islamic Practices and Spiritual Discipline”**

Mr. Aslan arrived fresh from a nearly year-long book tour (*No god but God: The Origins, Evolution, and Future of Islam*; New York: Random House, 2006) that included an appearance on “The Daily Show”, discussing the Sufi branch of Islam and the Spiritual *Exercises*. (Sufism is an Islamic mystical tradition.) Aslan outlined some important differences with Christian mystical traditions, mainly that Sufism is anti-monastic because it is a communal religion, that it categorically derides celibacy, and that Islam must eventually be cast off to attain true knowledge of God whereas Christians are permanently attached to their source religion. Though Muslims, Sufis regard all orthodoxy, law and theology as inadequate in attaining true knowledge of God. As one Sufi master said, “Why spend time reading a love letter [the Koran] in the presence of the beloved who wrote it?”

Sufism shares with traditional forms of Christian, Buddhist and Hindu mysticism Ignatius’s goal of “conquering the self”. The Sufis understand this goal as “becoming one with God,” as in the story about the Sufi martyr, Husayn Al-Hallaj who declared, “I am the truth [God],” and was viewed as heretical and was sentenced to death. His infamous statement was the result of the arduous path of spiritual self-reflection, with some differences and some likeness to the *Exercises*, that Sufis call ‘*tariqa*’ or ‘the way’. A parable, “The Conference of the Birds,” represents the stations and perils of this journey. At the end of the journey, the birds discover themselves, thus learning that for all their travails it was themselves they sought. Aslan’s presentation included a summary of key concepts of Sufism including *nafs*, *ruh*, *qalb*, *fana*, *ahadiyyah*, and variations on the exercises (vocal, silent, dance—whirling dervishes, calligraphy and others) known as *dhikr*.

**“Hindu Practices and Spiritual Discipline”**

Professor Nagarajan introduced herself as “a Hindu among the Jesuits.” She opened with a slide presentation of *kolam*, a traditional practice performed by women in India to honor and recognize the goddess Lakshmi by making geometric patterns on doorsteps and in rooms. Nagarajan proceeded to a brief “history of my own doubts about interreligious encounter,” primarily stressing her father’s experiences with
Jesuit schooling in India. Some of these doubts include the lack of symmetry in interreligious dialogue and whether or not there are preconceived notions of the end results of such dialogue (“Whenever I meet Christians, I am always aware of that imagination of me within their mind”). The notion of ‘idol’, as one example, is problematic in a dialogue between Christians and Indians. Also, the notion of ‘sin’ and how to approach it cross-culturally.

Another example from her own experience was that of having attended a Southern Baptist school in the United States and the strong need she felt the practitioners of that religion had to make her into one of themselves in the form of “being ready to accept Jesus Christ as her savior,” to which her answer was always, “Not yet.” The idea of what Nagarajan calls “this imagination of similarity,” which she felt Clooney was cautioning against in his earlier talk and comments, is one of the aspects that she has doubts about as well. Nevertheless, referring to Clooney’s outline and the statement in it that, “There is an immediacy to encounter with God, in experience and by way of practice,” she said, “A Hindu could just as well as have said that.” She closed by mentioning Clooney’s book, Divine Mother, Blessed Mother: Hindu Goddesses and the Virgin Mary (USA: Oxford University Press, 2004) as a “great bridging work.”

Panel II: Q & A

A questioner asked Nagarajan to elaborate on her father’s experience being educated by the Jesuits and what came through in that experience that she can relate to the Spiritual Exercises. She said that her interview with him on the subject revealed that he left as much a Hindu as he had been when he started and that he was very grateful for the experience. He also said that at that time it was fashionable to not have faith as a Hindu if you were pursuing an English education, although he was comfortable with certain practices considered “rational” such as yoga and meditation.

Dr. Bundy asked Aslan what dialogues, formal or informal, are going on now between Sufis, or Muslims, and Christians, what those dialogues focused on, and whether or not there are comparable or incomparable spiritual practices.

Aslan responded that there are certainly a number of Christian, Jewish, and Muslim groups that are deeply engaged in this kind of dialogue and it is probably most vibrant within the mystical traditions of these three faiths. Unfortunately he has found that most of the dialogue is along the lines of what they each stand against rather than what they stand for, standing together against abortion and homosexuality, for example.

Regarding mysticism, Sufis in the United States (a very large part of a very large group: Muslims are the largest religious minority in the U.S.) are currently undergoing significant mystical missionary targeting.

Professor Nelson asked Austin if she would like to respond to the idea about Buddhist missionaries in North America. After giving a brief summary of the Zen priest Suzuki’s story in America, beginning in 1959, and his accidental mission among the beatniks and “proto-hippies,” she said that her own invitation from the Soto Zen leadership to be a missionary troubles her because her understanding is that the tradition discourages missionary work. Asked by a questioner why that is, Austin answered that the core of the tradition is to live in enlightenment with all beings and not engage in risky behavior. And, “There is a risky, fine line between sharing and proselytizing.”

Another questioner asked about themes of spiritual growth that are common to all the traditions being discussed here with relation to the Spiritual Exercises.

Aslan answered that this is why he was emphasizing the idea of commonality and unity, which are the very foundations of Sufism. Nagarajan agreed, referencing “that moment of connectedness” between the individual and the larger self. Austin added that in Buddhism there is a strong tradition of confession and repentance, moment by moment, so that non-attachment is actually a process not a concept.

The final questioner asked Aslan to talk more about dhikr and the direct supervision needed when performing this. That dynamic is expressed metaphorically as a path that is dangerous and dark on which it is easy to get lost; you need a guide there to make sure that you come to a real internal understanding at each step of it. One master pours his knowledge into a disciple who finishes the path and then becomes a master and pours that knowledge into the next disciple—a chain of transition of religious authority. The master is referred to as Universal Man. The perfect man who has achieved this is seen as the mirror that reflects the universe. That sense of unity has to be very carefully supervised. Al-Hallaj was not condemned for the content of his statement but because he revealed the secret to the spiritually immature.

The same questioner asked where we move on from enlightenment. Is the next step service? Aslan said to remember that Sufism is not a monastic tradition. Nagarajan said that Hinduism was a tradition of devotion as expressed by service.

Panel III: Roundtable Discussion: “Comparative Perspectives Featuring All Symposium Speakers”

James Bretzke, S.J., Chair, Associate Professor and Chair, USF Department of Theology & Religious Studies
Victoria Austin
Francis X. Clooney
Christopher W. Gowans
Thomas J. Lucas
Vijaya Nagarajan

Professor Bretzke began with a “provocative observation”: Do we not have an elephant in the room? Where do we find elephant tamers? Is bridging a positive concept? It isn’t in disease transmission. Bridges go both ways, so how do you inoculate yourself against aggressiveness? Blessed ignorance is the beginning of conversation, of dialogue. There needs to be a bilateral ceasefire, a recognition that neither of our traditions has all the answers to allow for a genuine talking through.
Clooney said that doing dialogue has to be a long-term process, otherwise it’s like doing yoga once a year. The dangers of this process are the reason for the need for a guide or a guru. But, teachers and retreat directors need to stay out of the way. There is a trade-off between internal dialogue and interpersonal dialogue. When is it appropriate not to say what is going on and how is one able to say what’s happening in a fruitful way?

Gowans reiterated that dialogue has nothing to do with conversion. There is a danger of imposing oneself on others. There is also a danger of success: you lose a sense of what you’re about. If someone says that Jesus is the only savior, do others encounter this statement as an obstacle or a difference? Dialogue is not aiming at conversion or an ultimate unity. It is just an exploration and doesn’t see difference as a problem.

Lucas said that western hegemony is not a given or a given as good. There has been a lot of apology lately. But he doesn’t want to see the Baby Jesus thrown out with the bad bathwater.

Austin said she wanted to acknowledge that this is probably the first generation in a long time for which such an interreligious dialogue could be possible, that we have an unprecedented collection of spiritual traditions that are confident enough in their own groups to be able to actually speak with each other. When Buddha was about to die, he said to follow the important forms. Since this is about spiritual exercises, she suggests that we use those forms. One of the first steps would be to acknowledge what has been deformed by sin. Other elephants in the room that deform the potential for dialogue are the teacher-student relationship, power issues concerning majority and minority cultures, gender, and the history of traditions (what hasn’t been acknowledged by traditions that needs to be acknowledged). She believes that the second, third and fourth weeks of the Exercises are particularly valuable; who do we model ourselves on? Her experience with interreligious conversations is that it can take years to have good conversations.

Nagarajan asked what in the Hindu traditions would be equivalent to the Spiritual Exercises, though she felt it was hard to represent Hindu traditions.

Clooney wanted to add his thoughts about the many good things that have come from evangelizing and that he suspects that each tradition has some kind of genetic need to get outside of itself, and that removing the energy of the missionary tradition would have been a loss to both the missionaries and those they taught and learned from. Specific losses would include the dictionaries, the travel experiences, the international interactions.

Austin spoke of a church in England whose enormous beams had rotted, leaving people wondering what to do until a very old forester came forward and said people had been growing the trees for that purpose for 800 years. The question for us now is: What do we want to grow? Clooney offered that we have to learn across religious boundaries, and for this to work we cannot lapse into a language of despising the other, condescending to the other, or denying to the other some value or some voice. Once we do this, it has a significant transformative effect on us. Ideology and its authoritative structure has tried to prevent all that from happening. Ideology is the elephant in the room that says there is no process, nothing to be learned, let’s just go back to our roots. But, finally, it doesn’t have to be ideological. Still, you have to have some sense of remembering where you come from, and then creatively cross over ideology.

Lucas warned that there is a temptation for cultural amnesia. When we look outward, we find it difficult to look back. In terms of the success of the Jesuit missionaries in Asia, where they tried to engage the culture on its highest level they had a limited amount of success. They were more successful with the middle and lower classes in terms of religious headway and spiritual activities.

Nagarajan said that when talking about ‘conversion’ of the individual and the community, she was on the edge of her own thinking, conceptually. Conversion is a loaded term, politically. This is particularly true now, among Hindus in India and with respect to the right wing there. She loves the notion of ‘sharing the good news’, but what does that mean? What are the realities on the ground?

Austin noted that the last questioner began by saying, “If we could remove politics…” and asked if there had ever been a time when we could remove politics. She questioned whether, as soon as ‘truth’ is codified, it is still truth? There are several levels that things take place on: enlightenment happens on a personal level; teaching on an interpersonal level; lineage and dogma on an institutional level; and prejudice on a cultural level.

Gowans referred back to the story of Suzuki, and how people came to him and then he responded. Interreligious dialogue is different than even trying to attract people to come over to one’s side. Interreligious dialogue shouldn’t aim for that.

A questioner asked how we can bring the discussion to people who are completely turned away from organized religion because of the history of violence and exclusion associated with many of the traditions. She asked if there were any inter-faith dialogues that include atheists.

Gowans mentioned conferences between Buddhists and people who are not committed to any tradition as examples of this. Clooney said any dialogue of that kind has to be between people who are somewhat interested in spiritual matters, and that kind of dialogue in itself would be part of letting people in who are put off by religion. Austin asked him, “Are the Buddhists atheists?” (Laughter.) “Technically not,” he replied. “I can’t tell,” Austin said, “Because when people asked the Buddha he just remained silent.” Gowans said, “The philosophers will tell you that it depends on what you mean by God.” (More laughter.)

The next questioner said he’d had a struggle finding a copy of the Exercises, which he had wanted to read before the conference, and that he
wanted to know more about why they were not to be read but to be experienced.

Lucas warned about the translation of the *Spiritual Exercises* currently on the web, that it was the 1914 translation and doesn’t reflect recent scholarship. He said again that the *Exercises* are a methodological text about how to teach the experience, not a first-level book. The full *Exercises* are not for everybody. It’s a process that’s rare rather than frequent and Jesuits themselves will do it maybe twice in a lifetime.

Clooney summarized the panel discussion and the conference itself by asking the following questions. What kind of reflection does someone doing the *Spiritual Exercises* make at the end of the day? What worked and what didn’t? Did I actually find God present? Where? Go to that place again and stay with it. After this, one should ask, What should I do tomorrow?