

FEMININE PSYCHOLOGICAL AND SPIRITUAL CLUES TO THE SPIRITUAL EXERCISES

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THE WORD 'FEMININE' figures prominently in the title of this article rather than a reference to 'women'; this is quite deliberate. My purpose here is not to speak of women as such, nor to contribute to feminism. My topic has to do with gender, but not with sex. This distinction between sex and gender is of great importance in what is to follow. Admittedly, I am introducing an excessive dualism in this way, and I am leaving to one side the close relationship that connects them. But my subject is exclusively *gender*, by which I understand 'the complex area which covers all those aspects relating to differences and similarities between the sexes which are not strictly sexological'.¹ Thus I omit *sex*, which can be defined as 'the complex combination of components (genes, hormones, distinctive cerebral reactions) which are all to some extent biological'.² However, when one looks at those aspects which are not strictly biological—and which are always, as we shall see, impregnated by cultural variables—a study of feminine or masculine characteristics becomes possible, even if the terms 'feminine' and 'masculine' are not to be identified with 'women' and 'men'.

Now that basic concepts have been clarified, our first step will be to try to understand what may be called 'feminine' as a category in general, first in psychology, and secondly specifically in spirituality (again from the psychological point of view).

Characteristics of 'Feminine' Psychology

Studies of the differences between men and women have found that many of these exist in the areas of human development and functioning.³

¹ Juan Fernández, 'El sexo y el género: dos dominios científicos diferentes que debieran ser clarificados', *Psicothema*, 22/2 (2010), 256–262, here 259.

² Fernández, 'El sexo y el género', 258.

³ Here we give a simple summary of the findings in this area. For our present purpose we can prescind from any in-depth analysis of questions that have appeared, such as the stability or fluidity of features

First, in the cognitive area, there are differences relating to such basic functions as verbal facility (stronger in women), visuo-spatial capacity (stronger in men) and numerical capacity (also stronger in men, although differences in calculus may be better understood as related to spatial awareness). Analytic rationalisation, which is deductive, abstract and 'scientific', would be more characteristic of men, whereas women tend to have greater facility for inductive, integrating or intuitive modes of thought.

In another area, women are better than men at expressing emotions: they talk more frequently about their feelings, using a richer vocabulary, and referring to emotional experiences (both positive and negative) that are more intense than those experienced by men. They seek out such emotions more frequently and can cope with them better. Throughout the various stages of life, there is a radical difference in how women feel, recognise and express emotions. In short, anything to do with the emotions is acknowledged to be most firmly associated with the 'feminine'.

The most recent theories about feminine psychological development tend to concentrate especially on the importance of relationships in the lives of women, and they suggest that healthy relationships with others are both the means and the end of such development. Social support has, in fact, a stronger protective effect on women than it has on men, and this is especially so when the help given comes from other women. The 'with-others' dimension is more important and beneficial in the case of the feminine than is the 'above-others' dimension. The role of the feminine has been understood to be that of support and well-being in relation to others. Thus, another typically 'feminine' characteristic is that which has to do with relationships. The feminine contribution tends to maintain and support relationships by means of intimacy, trust, altruism and empathy.

And in the case of women, empathy consists not simply in understanding and registering what is happening and what others are seeing, but in feeling a mutual connection at a different level from the purely rational. Given the classical distinction between *cognitive* and *affective* empathy, the first adopts the cognitive perspective of the other person, and enables an understanding of a situation from that person's point of

in the vital cycle or their dependence on variable sociocultural factors. Also, given the aim of this article, we pass over the extraordinary diversity of aspects connected with gender; we are well aware that any talk of 'masculine' and 'feminine' is an over-simplification, by which much is lost but clarity gained.

view; whereas the second shares the affective state of the other, and through an emotional reaction is able to feel the emotion of the other. The 'feminine' would have a special facility for the second, even though, as has been pointed out, social and cultural factors may come into play here (women appearing to veer towards affective empathy because, having internalised the stereotype of established gender, they think this is what is expected of them).⁴

The 'masculine' would be associated more with results, achievement, success and power (less in the sense of dominion over others than as an awareness of hierarchical relationships); also with the practical and with work which, in many cases, would have a fundamental value superior to friendships, leisure and health. The values traditionally associated with what is masculine are those associated with people who are strong, independent and in control when situations of intimacy, vulnerability or dependence arise. Some authors would claim that the 'masculine' has difficulty in combining the rational and the emotional, and in recognising and expressing needs properly.⁵

Differences have also been found in the way that problems are dealt with. Both men and women may react positively, but the strategies adopted differ: women tend to be less aggressive and less rational, but



⁴ Irene Fernández-Pinto, Belén López-Pérez and María Márquez, 'Empatía. Medidas, teorías y aplicaciones en revisión', *Anales de Psicología*, 24/2 (2008), 284–298.

⁵ Paul Giblin, 'Men Reconnecting Spirituality and Sexuality', *Journal of Spirituality in Mental Health*, 16 (2014), 74–88.

more sociable and more assertive. In a specific situation, women are seen to deal with the emotions produced by the problem and to be more preoccupied with whoever else is involved, whereas men concentrate more on direct attack and the search for a solution. There seems to be no difference with regard to moral issues (once the effects of education and profession have been taken into account),⁶ though perhaps there is a slightly greater tendency for 'care' in the case of women, and 'justice' in the case of men, but the establishment of such differences would depend on the methodology employed in the investigation.

Characteristics of 'Feminine' Spirituality

Psychology now gives increased importance to the term 'spirituality'; it has begun, in fact, to be thought of as the fifth force in psychotherapy and some suggest that it be considered the sixth major factor in personality. However, the definition of spirituality in psychology has proved to be complicated. There are dozens of different definitions and each author proposes that different dimensions be included. A survey of these definitions in the search for common characteristics leads one to conclude that the following dimensions of spirituality are to be found in the various psychological studies of the theme:

1. the search for the answer to questions about the meaning of life and its purpose;
2. transcendence, or the capacity an individual has to insert a distance between his or her immediate sense of time and space in order to look at life from another, wider perspective;
3. the search for a relationship with the sacred or transcendent; the term 'sacred' being taken to refer to 'a divine being, a divine object, the Final Reality or the Final Truth';
4. 'connectivity' or connection, the feeling that one is part of a wider human community or that one is part of a wider whole (such as the universe);
5. positive feelings of well-being or healing: for example, experiences of new-found strength or interior peace; the feeling of fulfilment and happiness, growth as a person and arrival at a higher spiritual level.

⁶ Michael R. Levenson, 'Gender and Wisdom: The Roles of Compassion and Moral Development', *Research in Human Development*, 6/1 (2009), 45–59.

These elements are brought together well in the following definition of spirituality:

By spirituality is meant the human propensity to seek for the meaning of life by means of a transcendence of oneself; it is the feeling of being related to something greater than oneself; it may or may not include formal religious participation.⁷

According to this writer, a strong sense of spirituality is associated with a meaningful relationship with the divine, a deep feeling of belonging to a greater 'whole' or of participating in the universe and the lived experience of well-being or improvement. In psychology, the third and fourth factors mentioned above have been put forward as the central dimensions of spirituality, so much so that people begin to speak of a 'Relational Spirituality'; in the study of this, what is known of the relationships between individuals is brought into play.

The effects of spirituality on personal well-being depend not so much on the level of spirituality or religiosity as on the type of relationship that is established in such a spirituality. Among possible forms of relationship, one may find: a firm contact with God (a feeling of security in the connection with God); spiritual instability (shown in intense emotional reactions, such as fear of punishment or of abandonment); a sense of spiritual grandeur (such persons having a narcissistic sense of being in relationship with the sacred, and so feeling themselves more spiritual or more favoured than others or more worthy of reward); or a feeling of being at variance with God (feeling anger, depression or frustration, which can at times lead to a more realistic acceptance of one's spiritual experience, or can result at other times in chronic spiritual conflict).⁸

The individual differences in the security or insecurity of the contact with God allow for an understanding of some of the experiences that occur in spirituality. For example, an insecure attachment links up with a marked instability in spiritual experience, which may include a propensity for sudden conversions, for acceptance of new spiritualities (such as New Age spiritualities) or for seeking and experiencing altered

⁷ Diane Ruth Lauer, 'Commonalities in Women's Spirituality and Women's Health', *Advances in Nursing Science*, 22/3 (2000), 76–88, here 79.

⁸ David Paine and Stephen J. Sandage, 'Religious Involvement and Depression: The Mediating Effect of Relational Spirituality', *Journal of Religion and Health*, 56 (2017), 269–283.

states of consciousness (absorption, or dissociation). In all such cases, the spirituality may serve to inhibit other more practical steps that would be useful in facing up to problems or reducing stress. On the other hand, a secure attachment, the feeling that one is closely connected with God, carries with it reduced signs of depression and loneliness, and increased signs of self-esteem, maturity in one's relationships and psycho-social competence. In such circumstances, a spirituality comes to be an important source of strength, good sense and courage.

In the light of this summary of the psychological notion of spirituality, the following question arises: are there distinctive aspects of a feminine spirituality? Can it be distinguished from masculine spirituality, or from spirituality in general?

At the sheer 'quantitative' level, women tend to be more spiritual and religious than men. They think of their faith as more important in their daily lives, they invest themselves more personally in their beliefs and in the divine and feel closer to God; they pray more, and they more frequently seek spiritual companions and religious consolation when they have problems. There are also differences in the role that spirituality plays in their lives: for example, spiritual experiences would appear to predict health, well-being and self-esteem only in women, but not in men.⁹

However, the (few) authors who have written about feminine spirituality point out that, quite apart from these quantitative or functional differences, the general dimensions of spirituality listed above are also



⁹ Joanna Maselko and Laura D. Kubzansky, 'Gender Differences in Religious Practices, Spiritual Experiences and Health: Results from the US General Social Survey', *Social Science and Medicine*, 62 (2006), 2848–2860.

to be found in feminine spirituality, although with distinctive ways of understanding and putting them into practice. Thus the feminine spiritual experience tends to have the following characteristics:

1. It has an *interrelational* quality. We have seen that relationship or connection is one of the general dimensions of any spirituality, but in the case of women it has a central role in psychological development, well-being and the process of decision-making. *Being in relationship* is quite central to feminine spirituality. When women are asked how they define and experience spirituality they reply that they do so in terms of relationship with a superior being outside themselves, rather than in terms of individuation, personal development or summaries of belief (the reply more frequently given by men).¹⁰ While men also enter into relationships, there is a difference in how they live them, their motives for establishing them, which they consider more important, their style and purpose, and what they achieve by them. Whereas women concentrate on the personal connection with a loving God and with members of their communities, men focus more on the power and judgment of God and on the practice of spiritual discipline. Such differences carry important implications for spirituality. To grow in spirituality, women need to feel that they are accompanied and connected along the way. For them, it is by means of relationships with others that they build up a meaning and purpose to life, rather than by concepts such as discipline, individualism, the setting-up of aims and achievements, all of which are of little help in the development of a feminine spirituality.
2. There is an *affective* or emotional dimension: spirituality among women supposes a deep feeling of *love*. Women involve themselves much more emotionally in their faith and they want to explore the meaning of spiritual expressions; the divine, in the case of feminine spirituality, is understood to be something that heals, a spiritual power of love and integration, one that empowers, rather than a hierarchical power that seeks submission and obedience.

¹⁰ David B. Simpson and others, 'Sex and Gender Differences in Religiousness and Spirituality', *Journal of Psychology and Theology*, 36/1 (2008), 42–52.

3. It is in the experience of *care*, whether for themselves or for others, that women most especially experience the divine presence. Although this may appear to be of minor importance, it is quite fundamental. The importance that all caring relationships have for women (given a context in which the female role is still more associated with care than is that of men) has as a consequence that it is day-to-day situations, family relationships and social occasions that are fundamental as the sources of their spirituality. The presence of 'the sacred' is sought and found by them in the humdrum, in the daily round of tasks involving care for others.
4. Feminine spirituality adopts a process that is *circular* rather than linear. For women, spirituality is not so much 'the hero's journey' aiming at a goal, but rather is centred on a God who is present in the quotidian, and is a journey back and forth in the sharing of experiences, leadership and responsibilities with others. Its aim is not so much to try and find concrete answers to spiritual questions, but rather to find comfort, while long-term problems about the meaning of life and the spirit may remain pending.
5. Feminine spirituality relies on *intuition*, which is all-important for women in the process of finding meaning and making decisions. In Western society, formal logical reasoning (which is more masculine) has been given greater value, but the feminine form of reasoning, which integrates rather than analyses and which has a more intuitive holistic way of understanding the world, is a central component in any growth in feminine spirituality.
6. Finally, there is a vital difference in coping with moments of difficulty or *spiritual darkness*: women find it easier to navigate in the dark during long periods of obscurity; they can live through such times in a positive way, knowing how to profit from a heightened self-knowledge instead of struggling against such periods and trying to make them end quickly.

The 'Feminine' in the Spiritual Exercises

In this final section our aim is to review Ignatian texts in order to discover the elements of feminine spirituality (emotion, relationship, intuition, care, circularity, the daily and the image of the sacred) that are present and can be used when accompanying those persons whose spiritual

orientation is more feminine. It is quite surprising to find, as one rereads the Ignatian texts in the light of the dimensions mentioned, how omnipresent the feminine elements are, especially the emotional component. The explanation for this may lie in the knowledge Ignatius had of women and his special sensitivity in accompanying different persons in the area of spirituality.¹¹ In the first place, some general questions about the methodology of the Exercises need to be considered; then we will examine the concrete structure of the different Weeks, while we search for the presence of those aspects identified as ‘feminine’.

Even though the Exercises have at times been interpreted as being basically rational or intellectual, for some time now the value of *emotion* for the Ignatian spiritual task has been rediscovered. In the prelude to each of the exercises, Ignatius requires the exercitant to be in contact with his or her emotions: ‘to ask God our Lord for what I want and desire’ (Exx 48). He supposes that the feeling itself is already a cause for transformation. Moreover, the absence of affectivity is seen by Ignatius as a problem that needs to be closely examined (Exx 6). In the Exercises the emotional is a distinct path which complements the rational. Forces are to be found there, by means of the discernment of spirits, which, if redirected, tamed and properly used, can serve as a central criterion in the making of an election—where the emotional resonance is central to the decision taken—and, finally, put me in line with the purpose of my life.

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More feminine elements are to be seen in the repetition exercises: ‘notice and dwell on those points where I felt greater consolation or desolation, or had a greater spiritual experience’ (Exx 62). Here we can appreciate not only the importance of the emotional experience, but also the feminine *circularity* that was mentioned earlier. In the repetitions, there is no conclusion to be reached, no reasoning to be made and no linear process to be followed. One is simply present, permitting former experiences to return, finding relish in the movement back and forth, as was said above. In this way, Ignatius gives priority to ‘savouring ... interiorly’ rather than to ‘knowing much’ (Exx 2).

Also present in the Exercises is the *relational* aspect; this appears not so much in the relationship between the exercitant and the person who accompanies (though it is there) as in the final purpose and aim,

¹¹ Santiago Thió, ‘Ignacio, padre espiritual de mujeres’, *Mamresa*, 66 (1994), 417–436.

which is to facilitate a knowledge of, and a relationship with, the divine: to establish an interpersonal relationship with Jesus.¹² 'It is more appropriate and far better that the Creator and Lord himself should communicate himself to the devout soul, embracing it in love and praise.' (Exx 15) The one giving the Exercises is a mere instrument, his or her role being to facilitate the embrace, the contact, the relationship between the exercitant and God. In the words of Margaret Scott, 'one tries to be a witness on tip-toe, delicately, as if allowing God to blow a kiss'.¹³

From the feminine point of view what is sought and esteemed is not so much the image of the powerful King, the making of great decisions and the launching of an enterprise or adventure, but the experience of a new relationship, the sensation of an embrace, the ability to rest and gather strength while held in the bosom of God; then to pass on that emotion and that relationship to others in our daily lives. The image of the divine that Ignatius presents is lovable and generous, that of Someone who trusts me and cares for me, an eternal King who continues to invite me to follow him despite my defects, who loves me so much that he sacrifices himself for me, a God who embraces me. In other words, here is an image of the sacred with which one may easily fall in love; it is very much in tune with feminine spirituality.

Finally, the aspect of *care* is central to the Exercises: the whole methodology (most explicitly in the Additions) implies how Ignatius takes care of the exercitant as he or she advances through the process (advice given to the person who gives the exercises how best to assist the exercitant at different moments and stages). Ignatius also mentions how we are cared for by *the whole range of created beings* (Exx 60), how Jesus dedicates his life to caring for and healing us, indeed how God continually takes care of us (Exx 107, 234–237). The experience of feeling cared for and not only of caring for others is one of great significance for the feminine.

When one turns to the basic structure of the Exercises, in the First Week the *emotional* component has a special importance. The experience

¹² Simon Decloux, 'La transformación del yo y la experiencia de la relación interpersonal con Jesús', in *Psicología y Ejercicios Ignacianos*, edited by Carlos Alemany and José A. García-Monge (Bilbao and Santander: Mensajero and Sal Terrae, 1989), 397–411.

¹³ Margaret Scott, 'Los Ejercicios Espirituales dados y vividos por una mujer', *Manresa*, 66 (1994), 355–364, here 357.

evoked is deeply affective: one asks for personal shame and confusion, for 'growing and intense sorrow and tears' (Exx 55), to feel abhorrence for one's sins, with 'an exclamation of wonder and surging emotion' (Exx 60) as one seeks for a 'purgative' experience (Exx 10). Given the facility of the feminine for the emotional, the task in the First Week with persons who clearly have a feminine orientation will be not simply to facilitate the emotional experience, but to control any excess (especially with regard to feelings of guilt and shame), and to help those persons to identify and come to terms with the elements that are at the root of their disquiet (especially the daily causes). One has to bear in mind that such emotional experience is not an end in itself. Rather, to continue the Exercises the exercitant has to direct this emotion to its final purpose, 'finding God's will in the ordering of our life for the salvation of our soul' (Exx 1).

The Second Week would seem to have more masculine elements, such as the bellicose language, the decision to serve beneath a banner, the transformation of conversion into mission, reflection on what is to be done, 'work[ing] against their human sensitivities' (Exx 97). But the feminine/relational/non-linear/quotidian/non-rational reappears when the First Contemplation begs for 'an interior knowledge of Our Lord' (Exx 104): a knowledge that is emotional, visceral, *intuitive* rather than logical. As we contemplate, we enter into the mysteries of Christ's life, we take them into our hearts by simply being present and relishing, *as if I were present*, rejoicing in the person of Jesus, looking for no competition, no results, no achievements, simply looking, tasting ... but looking and tasting what is *quotidian*, the day-to-day of the Divine ... contemplating how Jesus *cares* for others, cures and heals, especially those most in need. Thus, for the feminine, the mission comes down to earth in what is inspired, intuited, felt, involving care and daily service.

In the Third Week, we continue to contemplate and to feel, but now it is with the contemplation of a passion, the passion of someone who is known, close to us, loved Once again, the petition is for 'sorrow, regret, and confusion, because the Lord is going to his Passion for my sins' (Exx 193), but now it is to shed tears with those who weep, to feel 'sorrow with Christ in sorrow' (Exx 203), to seek *empathy* (both rational and emotional), to be able to accompany by being there, looking on, not doing anything, allowing the feeling, putting up with the sorrow, enduring the dark moments A capacity for emotional empathy will make it easier to find this experience, but if this is linked to a facility for navigating

in the midst of *spiritual darkness* there may be some difficulty in making the transition to the Fourth Week. Once again, it may be necessary to control excess or becoming bogged down emotionally, especially if a person is someone of great feminine sensibility.

In the Fourth Week, once again one asks for an *emotion*: ‘to be glad and to rejoice intensely’ (Exx 221) with the risen One as we contemplate his resurrection appearances. From the feminine angle, the fifth point is especially appealing: ‘consider the office of consoler’ and ‘compare it with the way friends console one another’ (Exx 224). Equally the Contemplation to Attain Love (described by Margaret Scott as ‘what is most feminine in the whole Ignatian text’) talks not only of a feeling, but of a feeling that is transformed into life, one of service and care—‘love ought to manifest itself more by deeds than by words’ (Exx 230); a feeling that is communicated, a *relationship*—‘love consists in a mutual communication’ (Exx 231); and a feeling that is received—‘Give me love of yourself along with your grace, for that is enough for me’ (Exx 234). In the words of Scott: ‘to reread the Principle and Foundation from the feminine point of view is to replace it in the context of Love’.¹⁴

Conclusion

It is surprising that in the epoch of Ignatius there should be such a strong presence of the ‘feminine’ in the work of spirituality. The experience of the Exercises obviously contains many masculine elements—their detailed structure both in general and in each particular Week; the search for self-control; the emphasis on action, election, on the dominance of reason. Nevertheless, Ignatius makes us realise that the feminine has a central role in our decision-making and in our interior life, giving great importance to ‘savouring ... interiorly’; to the ‘movements of the spirits’ (with self-knowledge, awareness and application); to service and care as a means and an end; to the element of relationship (the creature embraced and cared for by the Lord); to the formation of an image of God as loveable and loving; and to requesting in place of achieving: ‘so that we may perceive interiorly that we cannot by ourselves bring on or retain great devotion, intense love, tears, or any other spiritual consolation, but that all these are a gift and grace from God our Lord’ (Exx 322). As Scott explains:

¹⁴ Scott, ‘Los Ejercicios Espirituales dados y vividos por una mujer’, 363.

Far from forging men and women who rely on their own capacity to do more by sheer willpower, Ignatius opens us up to God, making us more disposable and receptive, more 'feminine' so as to be able to work with, for and in God.¹⁵

The view that Ignatius has of the 'feminine', not as inimical but as complementary to the 'masculine', is very much in line with recent psychological studies of spirituality; their aim is not to establish differences, but to defend the thesis that the best type of spiritual development is that in which masculine and feminine aspects are balanced.¹⁶ If we move beyond the purely biological, if we leave to one side the biological distinction between men and women, if we cease to speak of 'women' and search rather for the *feminine elements* to be found in the Ignatian way, we encounter an entirely new and complete overview of spiritual maturity.

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translated by Joseph A. Munitiz SJ

¹⁵ Scott, 'Los Ejercicios Espirituales dados y vividos por una mujer', 358.

¹⁶ See Simpson and others, 'Sex and Gender Differences in Religiousness and Spirituality'.

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