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Thomas G. Plante  
*Santa Clara University*, [tplante@scu.edu](mailto:tplante@scu.edu)

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**St. Ignatius as Psychotherapist?**

**How Jesuit spirituality and wisdom can enhance psychotherapy**

### **Abstract**

The great wisdom traditions associated with various religious and spiritual practices and institutions have offered a variety of helpful strategies for more effective living and coping with life's many challenges. In most recent times, efforts to secularize these strategies have been made in order to appeal to the general population as well as to secular mental health professionals as tools for their clinical practices. While mindfulness meditation and yoga are perhaps the most notable examples, many other intervention strategies have been and can be borrowed from various religious and spiritual traditions to use in a secular manner if so desired. In this brief reflection, the wisdom and a few of the strategies of St. Ignatius, the founder of the Roman Catholic religious order called the Society of Jesus, commonly known as the Jesuits, are offered with examples presented in and for clinical practice.

*Keywords:* Jesuits, St. Ignatius, discernment, psychotherapy, spirituality, Catholic

In recent years, a wide variety of spiritually and religiously based strategies have been incorporated into secular psychotherapy (Plante, 2014, 2016a, 2016b). Perhaps the best known and researched example of this phenomenon is the use of mindfulness meditation and most especially mindfulness based stress reduction (e.g., Kabat-Zinn, 2003; Langer, 2014). Although from the Buddhist tradition, mindfulness has been popularized and secularized so that it is appealing to both patients and psychotherapists alike who come from a wide range of spiritual and religious traditions as well as for those from no spiritual and religious tradition at all (Kabat-Zinn, 1990, 1994). The interest, wisdom, and effectiveness of mindfulness, as well as other meditative practices (e.g., mantram training), can be helpful to many with or without embracing the spiritual or religious roots of the practice (e.g., Bormann, Gifford, Shively, Smith, Redwine, Kelly, ... Belding, 2006). This is also true for yoga. Although yoga emerged from the Hindu religious tradition, it too has been secularized in such a way to appeal to diverse populations who may or may not be interested in Hinduism or any particular religious or spiritual tradition (Hofmann, 2013; Horovitz & Elgelid, 2015). Yoga classes are everywhere and popular with many who find them helpful regardless of the history and religious roots of yoga practice. Certainly, a client or therapist does not need to be Buddhist or know a lot about Buddhism to learn and benefit from mindfulness and they also do not need to be a Hindu or know a lot about Hinduism to learn and benefit from yoga.

The many great and diverse wisdom traditions offer numerous potential tools to help modern day psychotherapy clients and psychotherapists. Many of these tools can be used in a way that can be agreeable to and comfortable for secular people who may or may not identify with the religious or spiritual tradition from where these tools originated. These various techniques, perspectives, and strategies from religious and spiritual traditions can be

incorporated into professional psychotherapy and clinical practice just as mindfulness and yoga have been already. The purpose of this brief reflection is to discuss how several Ignatian (Roman Catholic) tools and wisdom can be incorporated into psychotherapy for the modern and secular clinician and client. I'll highlight several examples that focus on (1) reflection and discernment using the 4 Ds, (2) the use of the Examen, (3) a three step process for dealing with difficult conversations using accommodation humility, and the expectation of goodness, and (4) finding God and the sacred in all things. There are many additional ways to use the wisdom and practices of Ignatian spirituality and wisdom into psychotherapy but these four strategies provide a solid introduction to how these Roman Catholic and Jesuit strategies can be secularized and used successfully in contemporary professional clinical psychotherapy practice with clinicians and clients who may or may not know very much about, or have any interest in, Catholicism or Ignatian practices. In my experience, there really is no need to be overly concerned with the theological basis or religious framework of these Ignatian informed practices or tools or need to revise the theological underpinnings or religious methodologies to borrow techniques or approaches from the tradition to use in a secular manner in psychotherapy.

### **Who was St. Ignatius?**

St. Ignatius was a 16<sup>th</sup> century Spaniard who founded the Roman Catholic religious order called the Society of Jesus or more popularly known as the Jesuits (de Loyola, 1954). During the past 500 years, Jesuits have found their way across the globe and have been and currently are active in a variety apostolic missions or ministries including higher education at the secondary and university levels (Nicolás, 2011). There are approximately 150 Jesuit colleges and universities in the world with 27 currently located in the United States. These include well known colleges and universities such as Georgetown, Boston College, Holy Cross, Fordham,

Santa Clara, and Loyola (in Baltimore, New Orleans, Chicago, and Los Angeles; Kolvenbach, 2008). Jesuits are often known for their academic rigor, interest in ethics and social justice, engagement with efforts helping the poor and marginalized of society, and their progressive approach to various social issues and challenges of the day (McDonough, 2008; Plante, 2018). Jesuits priests and religious brothers often pursue a wide variety of secular based career paths including those involving mental health care (such as becoming psychologists), law, business, STEM fields, humanities, education, and the social sciences. Thus, they are both engaged with religious life as Catholic priests and brothers but they also are very much engaged in the secular world and the professions.

### **Four Helpful Ignatian and Jesuits Strategies for Psychotherapy Practice**

#### **1. Reflection and discernment using the 4 Ds**

Jesuit spirituality often highlights ongoing reflection and discernment using what I refer to as the 4 Ds (see Plante, 2017 for details). The four D's include *discovery*, *detachment*, *discernment* (focusing on what brings one consolation vs desolation), and *direction*. Discovery refers to reflecting on, taking stock of, and considering one's gifts, talents, and interests. Detachment refers to trying to remove oneself from the many welcomed and unwelcomed influences in our lives such as the wishes, desires, expectations, and agendas of our family, friends, colleagues, and of society in general. Discernment suggests that we carefully consider and reflect upon what brings us joy, peace, and contentment that is consoling versus what brings us misery, unsettledness, unhappiness and is thus desolating. Direction provides next steps for thought and action after thoughtfully going through the process of discovery, detachment, and discernment.

The 4 D process can easily be secularized and used with our clinical clients to help them with a wide variety of decisions in their lives. It is a structure and process that leads people to thoughtfully reflect on their gifts and desires that hopefully can help them move towards consoling directions of thought and action. One does not need to be an expert in Ignatian spirituality or Catholic theology or history to keep the structure and process of the 4 D's in mind while working with therapy clients.

**Case Example 1: Vanessa.**

Vanessa is a college senior who is about to graduate and is unclear about her next steps in life. She is a psychology major and also has a child studies minor. Her parents want her to go into the family retail business but she feels unhappy about following her parents' footsteps and career path. She claims that she is not ready for graduate school but wants to make efforts to find a more satisfying life path and direction. Using the 4 Ds, she discovers that she has great gifts and talents with young children who she greatly enjoys. She mentions that children tend to take a quick liking to her and that time often flies when she is around them. She spends some time trying to detach from the desires of her parents as well as the influences of other family members, friends, and society at large that highlight career directions that prioritize financial gain and community status. Reflecting on her potential career and life choices she feels desolation when she imagines herself working in her parents' retail business yet feels consoled while visualizing her time working as a teacher's aide and working with children at a summer youth camp throughout her high school and college years. Vanessa decides to enroll in the Jesuit Volunteer Corps and work in another city for several years teaching children in an elementary school that is mostly populated with marginalized and poor children. Her two year commitment

allows her to further reflect on her interests and hopefully provide some much needed time and experience to determine her next steps.

In this case, I used the 4 D's to focus and structure clinical work to attend to Vanessa's discovery of her gifts and talents, a detachment from the voice and influence of her parents, a discernment of who is consoling vs desolating for her, and a direction for decision making that is informed by this process.

### **Case Example 2: Bob.**

Bob is a Silicon Valley business executive who made a great deal of money in the technology sector. Now in his early 50s, he has decided to take a sabbatical from work to reflect on his life and his next steps. In psychotherapy he discovers that he is no longer interested in business and the fast paced and pressured technology industry. He discovers that he wants to try his hand at a less pressured life and entered into psychotherapy as well as spiritual direction with a Jesuit priest to reflect upon his future. He tried to detach himself from the views of his peers and the local community who admire business success and financial excess. He found that he felt desolated being around business colleagues and the superficial conversations that they often had but felt more engaged and consoled being around spiritual people. He decided to try his hand at working part time at a church affiliated food pantry and as well as tutoring 5<sup>th</sup> grade children at a low income Catholic elementary school. He continues to discern his next steps but feels convinced that he will never go back to the business and technology community feeling that it does not provide meaning, purpose, and a consoling life for him path any longer.

Like Vanessa in the earlier example, in this case Bob discovers that his interests have moved away from the business world and the 4 D process in psychotherapy helped him to detach from the society and community expectations for financial success and prestige. While Bob may



not be clear about his future he comes to realize that his previous work was desolating and not consoling and looking for a more meaningful and satisfying path that was spiritually informed likely will be more consoling for him moving forward.

### **1. The Examen**

The Examen is an end of day prayer and meditative practice that offers structure and strategies that can be secularized to help anyone reflect upon and learn from their day (Gallagher, 2006; Manney, 2011). The Examen instructs us with several particular prompts to reflect on the moments of the day starting with gratitude. One is asked to consider the various elements and parts of the day that one is grateful for. These may be big or small memories and moments such as enjoying a sunny day, having a good conversation with someone, or just being alive. One is asked to see where God (or the divine or whatever one's notion might be of a higher power or sacred presence) was evident during various moments of the day. One is also asked to consider where one was perhaps at their best and at their worst during the day and what one might think and do better tomorrow and in the foreseeable future. The Examen is a process and a daily reflection and meditative ritual that ask us to take stock of each day and to consider our life at our best and worst moments reflecting on how the sacred was with us throughout. It helps us to be grateful for what we have each day, to see where the divine influence has been with us at various moments, and consider how we might do better tomorrow and in the future.

#### **Case Example 3: Lea.**

Lea is in her mid-70s and tends to see the glass as half empty rather than half full. She has been married for over 50 years, is an active Catholic, and has experienced chronic depression and anxiety. Her depression has been especially difficult in more recent years as she had a double mastectomy after being diagnosed with Stage 3 breast cancer. Although she is doing fine

medically and her doctors report that her prognosis is excellent, she worries a lot and feels damaged by her experience with cancer. In psychotherapy, she was encouraged to practice the daily Examen at the end of each day. She found that forcing herself to reflect on her day, to express in prayer gratitude for her life and to make efforts to see God's presence in various parts of her day helped her to feel more consoled and relaxed. Her husband started to practice the Examen as well after seeing the benefits it offered for Lea. They now do it together before bed each night and they enjoy the unexpected bonding experience in doing so.

In this case example, Lea benefits from the wisdom of the Examen that includes a daily time for reflection, gratitude, and prayer that may be relaxing as well as a bonding time with her husband.

#### **Case Example 4: Rachel.**

Rachel is 60-years-old and a high-level human resources professional in a Fortune 500 company. She is a no-nonsense and hard-edged person who is ambitious setting very high goals for herself and for those around her. She says that she is "tough as nails" and is proud of it. She came to psychotherapy because she was experiencing significant marital challenges, had a recent health scare, and recently lost her adult daughter to cancer. Although not religious at all, she was open to trying the Examen as a way to reflect on her day, to learn to be more grateful for the positive and good elements in her life, and to feel more consoled by thoughts of a more spiritual process and engagement. She found that practicing the Examen before bed helped her to sleep better as well which she really appreciated as someone who had suffered from insomnia often. Over time, she practiced the Examen daily, felt more positive about her life and circumstances, and felt more at peace.

In this case, Rachel's use of the Examen may also act as a relaxation intervention and a distraction from her work and other matters that occupy her mind before sleep.

## **2. Accommodation, humility, and the expectation of goodness**

Ignatian approaches to dealing with challenging conversations suggests following a three step process to engage with others, especially with those who we find most challenging to interact with (Exercices Spirituels de Discernement Apostolique en Commun, 2016). First, we begin with *accommodation* which asks us to consider the perspective of the other by trying to get a sense of being in their skin and seeing the world through their eyes. Accommodation may be a form of empathy as well. Then, approaching them with *humility* being mindful that we cannot ever know all of the answers or the right way to think and behave all of the time. Humility reminds us to appreciate that we do not have all the answers and that our knowledge and opinions have limitations. And finally, the *expectation of goodness* asks us to assume that the other person wants to do the right thing, wants to be good, and yet may struggle with doing so due to fears, anxieties, lack of information, or for other reasons. The expectation of goodness goes beyond the Rogerian concept of unconditional positive regard and speaks to the inherent goodness or "better angels of our nature" within everyone. Thus, accommodation, humility, and the expectation of goodness provide a useful framework and approach to having difficult conversations with others.

### **Case Example 5: Lori.**

Lori is a college student having roommate problems. Tensions are high as she has to share a small living space and her roommate, Lynn, who has beliefs, practices, and habits that Lori finds offensive. For a variety of reasons, Lori feels that she has to stick it out for the remaining academic year before trying to find a more suitable living situation next year. In

psychotherapy, we discuss the notion of *accommodation* to try and better understand Lynn's perspective. Lori has dinner with Lynn and her parents during a parents' weekend visitation which provides her with a rich opportunity to better understand Lynn's way of being by speaking with her parents in some detail. She understands that Lynn is a product of a different culture and perspective based on her growing up experiences. Lori practices *humility* by trying to be less judgmental and more understanding of Lynn. Finally, Lori tries to see the *goodness* in Lynn by trying to understand that Lynn is trying, in her own way, to do what is right but that she has different ways of going about doing so. While Lori and Lynn may never be best friends, Lori learns to be a more accepting person that lowers her anxiety and tension in her college dorm experience.

**Case Example 6: Quela.**

Quela is a left leaning Democrat that comes from a right leaning Republican family. After the 2016 presidential election in the United States won by Donald Trump, Quela was upset by the taunting she received from her older brother who was pleased with the Trump victory. Thanksgiving was coming up and she felt that she could not face her brother and her extended family for the holiday celebration due to their differences in political beliefs and perspectives. She was so angry at the election outcome and angry with her brother in particular because he seemed most pleased by her distress after the election. In psychotherapy she was trying to decide if she should skip the traditional Thanksgiving holiday celebrations with her family. She was concerned that she would make a big statement to the family if she failed to participate and did not want to hurt her elderly parents' feelings or create a wider rift within the family. Quela learned about the accommodation, humility, and expectation of goodness model and developed a plan to attend the celebrations with this model in mind. She had a better appreciation of why her

family and brother felt as they do and decided to approach them with humility. While she disagrees with their politics, she understands that their views are to be respected and knows that they mean well in their own way. She attended the event and still felt uncomfortable and distressed but was able to cope better than she had anticipated by using the model to manage her feeling and behavior with her family members.

### **3. “Finding God in all things”**

Ignatian spirituality seeks to “find God in all things” (Barry & From, 2008; de Loyola, 1954; Manney, 2011; Martin, 2010). Or, if one does not feel comfortable with the notion of God, then perhaps they may feel better or more at ease with the notion of seeing the divine, sacred, or life giving spark in everyone and in all things. This notion is similar to the Namaste greeting in Hinduism which in essence means “the divine in me recognizes the divine in you” (Oxhandler, 2017) or the higher power notion in Alcoholics Anonymous. This perspective is important and powerful because if you truly seek to see the divine, sacred, or God in all, then everyone becomes important, is worthy of respect and dignity, and it becomes much harder to treat others as objects or disrespectfully. While certainly the notion of God is critically important in Ignatian spirituality it can be adapted for a more religious diverse audience as Alcoholics Anonymous and others have done.

#### **Case Example 7: Tim.**

Tim is an engaged Christian who has a tendency to be judgmental and preachy with others. He sometimes gets into conflicts with friends, colleagues, and family members about “his way or the highway” attitude. In psychotherapy, he learns about the notion of the Namaste greeting and likes that view that the sacred and divine are in all. He practices seeing the face of Jesus in all he interacts with and borrows from the Rule of St. Benedict (Chapter 53:1; Benedict,

1906; Chittister, 1992) that, for example, treats everyone as if they are Jesus himself. In Jesuit language, “finding God in all things” appeals to him. This strategy is hard for Tim at first but over several months he finds that it helps him appreciate others more, even those who are very different from him, and he finds himself getting along much better with people.

### **Case Example 8: Aaron.**

Aaron is in his 50s and has had an anger problem. After working for 30 years in construction with the same company he was fired after expressing anger to a customer who complained about his behavior to his boss. Although Aaron has been generally happily married for 25 years, he often gets into screaming fights with his wife and daughter that quickly turns ugly in everyone’s mind. He sought psychotherapy after he was fired from his job as part of an employee assistance program. Although not especially religious, he found the notion that one should work to see the sacred in all things appealing. He worked to do so trying to see everyone as more sacred and having the divine spark somewhere deep inside them. Over time, he became gentler and was rewarded by praise for his change in behavior by his wife, daughter, and others. Eventually, he found a new job and has been able to better manage his angry impulses better by making an effort to seeing everyone as sacred and divine.

### **Conclusion**

Although spiritually and religiously rooted interventions and practices such as mindfulness and yoga get most of the attention in recent years, there are numerous other spiritually and religiously rooted strategies that can be well integrated into professional clinical practice. In this article, several strategies are highlighted that are rooted in the wisdom and guidance of St. Ignatius and Jesuit spirituality from the Roman Catholic faith tradition. Although Roman Catholic in origin these strategies can easily be used in secular professional and personal

environments. In my use of these four spiritual practices in psychotherapy, I provide clients with psychoeducation on the practice and aid them in exploring how it can be applied in their life if it is appealing to them and they are willing to do so. Regardless of the spiritual or religious background of the practitioner or client, there is much wisdom in the religious and spiritual traditions that can be adapted in such a way to be appealing to very diverse populations. St. Ignatius may not have been a psychotherapist but perhaps he could have been given some of the helpful strategies that he and his fellow Jesuits have developed and highlighted over the past 500 years.

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