



Ignatius of Loyola: Apostle to the Muslims

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To educate the youth of Europe? To fight the spread of Protestantism? While many people would guess that one or both of these ambitions drove Ignatius of Loyola to found the Jesuits, he actually had something else in mind: a mission to the Muslim world. For the feast of St Ignatius, Damian Howard SJ considers how 'Islam haunted Ignatius's understanding of his calling' and celebrates the fruitful work of the many Jesuits who have tried to realise Ignatius's vision in their engagement with Muslims.

Ask the average Catholic why St Ignatius of Loyola founded the Society of Jesus and they will likely say one of two things. First, remembering the Jesuits as bastions of the Counter-Reformation they might assume that Ignatius, militant Catholic that he was, had set out with a dream of a new religious order capable of defeating Protestantism. But whilst it was the case that the Jesuits would be active in efforts to reform the Catholic Church from within and to take on the growing power of Protestant theology and culture as it spread across Europe, this was never Ignatius's underlying vision. Second, they might suppose that Ignatius had planned from the start a vast network of new schools which would revolutionise education throughout the continent. It's true that this is indeed what Jesuit schools ended up doing, earning the order's members the epithet of the 'schoolmasters of Europe', but this huge and innovative project came about as the result of a proposal made to Ignatius after he had already become Superior General of the new order; it was never education *per se* that he saw as its prime mission.

So the following claim may be unexpected: Ignatius's original apostolic orientation was actually defined in relation to the Muslim world.



From Peter Paul Rubens 'The Life of Ignatius'

This shouldn't be entirely surprising given the state of Europe at that time in history. Ignatius was born in the Basque country in 1491. Just one year later, the *Reconquista* reached its conclusion with the Catholic Kings finally ousting the last Muslim rulers from their vestigial Andalusian states, giving Christian princes possession of the whole Iberian Peninsula. The year 1492 was also notable for another major geopolitical event involving Spain: the

European discovery of the New World. It was all but impossible to avoid the thought that America was the reward for Spanish triumph against the Moors. Now, the energy which had propelled the Spanish conquest of the Iberian Peninsula would be released outwards; the colonial age of conquest and exploitation was dawning for a new Catholic Spain and it was to be a golden age for Spanish Catholicism. We may rightly harbour ambiguous feelings about this aggressively Christian state but this was a moment when Spanish Catholics must have felt like masters of the world.

But Spain was the exception in Europe. The rest of the continent cowered under the threat of imminent Muslim invasion, not from the South but from the Ottoman Turks in the East. The sixteenth century was to see the high-water mark of Ottoman interest in Central and Eastern Europe. Suleiman the Magnificent, Sultan from 1520-1566, would personally lead the

push all the way into Hungary as well as taking control of Mediterranean islands like Rhodes and swathes of North Africa. With Turkish armies besieging Vienna, no-one on the continental mainland could feel confident that Christianity would retain indefinitely its hegemonic grip. It's worth remembering that part of the urgency of the Reformation itself lay in its apocalyptic fear of the Turkish menace. Luther thought that the Muslim invaders were to be God's chastisement for a Europe mired in the 'horrible abomination of the papal darkness and idolatry'.¹ He wanted his Protestant Christians to die martyrs of the true faith rather than fighting in some allegedly holy war blasphemously prosecuted in Christ's name.

The Reformation can be better understood within the context of this much larger clash, dare I say, of civilisations. And Ignatius wanted to play his part in it. How can one be confident of such a claim? Because, right from the start, Ignatius's stated apostolic impulse was towards the Muslim world.

You can see it most obviously in the account given in his *Autobiography* of the conversion experience he went through as he was convalescing in his ancestral home in Loyola. He had suffered a severe cannon wound in the leg during military action in Pamplona. His moment of conversion came about when he noticed the subtlest of differences between the after-effects of two daydreams:

When he thought of worldly things it gave him great pleasure, but afterward he found himself dry and sad. But when he thought of journeying to Jerusalem, and of living only on herbs, and practising austerities, he found pleasure not only while thinking of them, but also when he had ceased.

He took that difference between his affective responses to be indicative of the way God was leading him on his life journey. Judging that the enduring good feelings associated with the journey to Jerusalem showed it to be God's will for him, he undertook to follow the second programme, going on pilgrimage and living the ascetical, penitential life of a mendicant. The journey to Jerusalem, then, was what he presented to the outside world as his earliest apostolic desire. Its association with his conversion experience also makes it, surely, something of a touchstone of his on-going spiritual discernment.²

But what exactly did pilgrimage to Jerusalem signify? Pilgrimage to the Holy Land had been the most potent form of devotion available to medieval Christians and, for Ignatius, it is clear that proximity to the site of the incarnation was a central attraction; at one stage, he would go to extravagant lengths to work out the precise direction in which the Lord must have been looking at the moment of his [Ascension](#). But at the time, the Holy City was also under the rule of the Ottoman Turks, the Crusades having failed to win back for Christian Europe the territory once held by the Roman Empire. To visit Jerusalem was, thus, to enter the House of Islam.

If we look at the *Spiritual Exercises*, especially the 'Call of the Eternal King' (93), we might surmise that the trip had a crusading flavour to it. But Ignatius wasn't planning to travel as a soldier. Instead, in addition to visiting the holy places, he intended to stay in Jerusalem permanently, if the Lord was pleased to allow him, so as to preach Christian doctrine to the infidel (probably Jews as well as Muslims), this, even though European Christians had long found such missionary work to be not particularly fruitful.³ There is clearly a penitential streak to Ignatius's intentions at this stage and so perhaps we should also allow for the possible presence of a darker scenario: a veiled desire here to win martyrdom. We are reminded of the martyrs of Córdoba, a group consisting principally of Franciscan friars who, in spite of St Francis' directive to live as silent witness among the Muslims, had sought to goad their Muslim governors into executing them by making overtly blasphemous statements about Muhammad. It's a repeated trope in the early Middle Ages and it is possible that Ignatius felt himself drawn to act after their example.

Whatever Ignatius was up to, this pilgrimage project came to encapsulate his self-understanding, certainly for the first few years after his conversion and, arguably, for the rest of his life; moreover, it gave him the epithet of 'the Pilgrim' which he uses in his *Autobiography* to designate himself in the third person. When he finally made it to the Holy Land in 1523, he desired to remain there but the Provincial of the Franciscans told him that others in the past who had had the same idea had either died or ended up in a Turkish prison. Ignatius was stubborn. The Franciscan, knowing trouble when he saw it, threatened him with excommunication and so the Basque Pilgrim finally relented. But the longing to return to and

remain in Jerusalem was strong enough in Ignatius's heart that it survived fifteen years of studies and apostolic activities; for when as late as 1538 he finally managed to assemble the group of Companions who would go on to form the core of the new Society of Jesus, he was still intent on their heading back to the Holy Land. It was only the impossibility of travelling that year, thanks to the activity of the Turks themselves, which led him finally to give up on Jerusalem and turn his sights to Rome.

It was a fateful shift. Gradually, the dream of Jerusalem would be side-lined and a new apostolic orientation would move centre stage. Italy, as Pope Paul III put it, would be Ignatius's Jerusalem. And so it was that the young Jesuit order placed itself at the disposal of the universal Church directly under the Roman Pontiff where it would be best placed to meet the various needs that would present themselves. 'The infidel' still manages an appearance in the 'Formula of the Institute' which founds the Society of Jesus but it looks like an afterthought. So much, you might think, for Ignatius's apostolate to the Muslims...

There are good reasons, nevertheless, for believing that Islam continued to haunt Ignatius's understanding of his calling. A curious incident early on in the pilgrimage narrative gives us a clue. It is an encounter between the Pilgrim and a Moor whom he meets as he makes his way through the Spanish countryside. Here is how he tells the story with hindsight in his *Autobiography*:

As he continued on his way a Moor riding on a mule caught up with him, and in their conversation they began to speak about our Lady. The Moor said that it certainly seemed to him that the Virgin had conceived without the aid of man, but he could not believe that in giving birth she remained a virgin. To substantiate his opinion, he offered the natural reasons that occurred to him. Though the pilgrim countered with many arguments he could not alter the Moor's opinion. The Moor then went on ahead in great haste so that he lost sight of him; being left behind, he reflected on what took place between him and the Moor. Various emotions welled up in him and he became disturbed in soul, thinking that he had failed to do what he should have done. Filled with anger against the Moor and thinking that he had done wrong in allowing the Moor to utter such things about our Lady, he concluded that he

was obliged to restore her honour. He now desired to search out the Moor and strike him with his dagger for all that he had said. This conflict in his desires remained with him for some time, but in the end he was still uncertain for he did not know what was required of him.

As well as giving a precious insight into Christian-Muslim relations in the early sixteenth century, this cameo tells us much about how Ignatius looked back in later life over the winding journey that had brought him to Rome. He wants his readers to be shocked by the spiritual ineptitude which characterised his early years. His confusion is resolved in rather a worrying manner: he leaves it to his mule to decide whether or not to take a human life. The sage beast, seemingly much more attuned to the promptings of the Spirit than the saint-to-be, rejects the path of violence and the rest, as they say, is history. What is significant for our purposes is that Ignatius's story suggests an association in his mind between startling spiritual immaturity and a violent, confrontational approach to Muslims. He may not have drawn any solid conclusions about what a more mature response might look like but the doubt must have niggled.

Ignatius definitely did not give up on his ideas of a mission to Muslims, even if they take a back seat: during his tenure as General he set up a *Casa dei catechumeni* in Rome for Jews and Muslims wanting to convert to Christianity, an Arabic-speaking house in Messina, a college for the study of Arabic in Monreale and a study programme in Islamics in Malta. He had further plans for projects aimed at the mission to Muslims in Beirut, Cyprus and Djerba in modern Tunisia.

We also have two letters, written in August 1552 by his secretary, Juan de Polanco, to Jerónimo Nadal, in which Ignatius advocates the raising of a European fleet to fight off the Ottoman Turks. As Philip Endean points out, even if the older Ignatius had learned to be suspicious of his earlier, irascible impulses towards a Muslim, still, when it comes to thinking of the Turks, it is purely as an

enemy to be conquered, the enemy menacing Christendom. Any full statement of mission at the frontiers had to include them, but in immediate practice they were simply an unknown and destabilising threat, one perhaps that it was often impolite to name.⁴

A Challenging Legacy

Ignatius's Islamic itinerary leaves us with bewildering questions rather than a coherent vision and it may or may not be significant that all these grand endeavours vis-à-vis the Muslims either did not get off the ground in the first place or did not last. If there is, indeed, a palpable sense of unresolved business here, Islam had, nevertheless, lodged itself as a constituent part of the Jesuits' DNA, as we can see with the benefit of hindsight. For Ignatius's sons (along with members of other religious orders, not least the Franciscans, the Dominicans and the White Fathers) have demonstrated consistent and persistent interest in the Muslim world.

Jesuits were present in Istanbul by 1582 and by 1650 had set up a presence in Izmir, Aleppo, Damascus, Sidon and Lebanese Tripoli. Their most iconic engagement with the Muslim world was the series of missions sent to the court of the Mogul Emperor Akbar in late sixteenth century India. Fr Jerome Xavier (1549-1617), the great-nephew of St Francis Xavier, was to be the principal protagonist in a bold engagement with Persian-speaking Islam. His most significant literary work was an explanation of Christianity aimed at the Emperor and other Muslims, the so-called [Mirror of Holiness \(*Mir'at al-Quds*\)](#) (1602).

Actually meeting Muslims in their own countries may not instantly have changed the way Jesuits thought theologically about Islam but it did help them slowly to develop an accurate understanding of the religion rather than rely on the polemics and distortions which had been the medieval default position. And that did bear fruit quite quickly: back in the Jesuit colleges of Europe, lessons on Islam were an integral part of Antonio Possevino's great *Ratio Studiorum* (1593), a standard text which deals with Islam at some length and in a surprisingly sympathetic manner.

For most of their history, Jesuits were not allowed to converse about matters religious with Muslims in Muslim-majority countries for fear that in doing so they might jeopardise their freedom to act in those territories. This did not prevent them from chatting to them on their holidays. Tirso González (1624-1705), a future Jesuit General himself, wrote his *Manductio ad conversionem mahumetanorum* out of his personal experience preaching to Muslims in the coastal towns of Spain during his vacation. A huge volume at nearly

900 pages, it shows a surprisingly accurate knowledge of Islam, of typical Muslim objections to Christianity, of *tafsir* (Qur'anic commentaries) and hadith. For a polemical text it is also disarmingly sympathetic to Islamic beliefs and practices.

A French Jesuit, Michel Nau (1633-1683) had travelled to the Holy Land and engaged in conversation with Muslims there. His *Religio christiana contra Alcoranum per Alcoranum pacifiche defensa ac probate* stands out from similar texts as a refreshing defence of respectful interreligious encounter. Written as a fictional dialogue, it assumes a startlingly modern mood of respect, humility and friendship. Perhaps such openness is down to the fact that he was operating outside Europe and knew he could not proselytise openly. More likely, it is part of that Jesuit tradition of generous engagement with the religious other that can be found in a number of early Jesuits, including Ignatius's Letters, the ministry of [St Pierre Favre](#) to European Protestants, and the approach advocated at various times by Jerónimo Nadal and Diego Laínez. The denouement of Nau's dialogue must have been shocking at a time when Christianity thought of itself as being in the ascendant: the Muslim protagonist agrees that Christianity is a legitimate expression of monotheism (no mean concession given traditional Muslim hostility to the doctrine of the Trinity) but he does not accept Christianity as the only way to salvation and refuses to convert.

A moment of great significance in the evolution of the Jesuit mission to Muslims occurs in 1937 when Fr General Ledochowski sends a letter to Jesuits around the globe appealing for a new generation of missionaries to be trained with the explicit task of converting the Muslim world. Ledochowski was a strong personality of markedly right wing views and his letter is far from betokening an enlightened vision; during his time as General, he seems to have been behind a move to bolster anti-Semitic sentiment in Rome. Behind his letter can be traced the influence of an energetic Frenchman, Christophe de Bonneville, regional superior in Egypt at a time when the domination of that great Muslim country by European powers seemed to open up new missionary possibilities. The idea of Jesuits explicitly setting out to convert Muslims in Muslim-majority lands represented a fundamental break with previous practice.

This opportunistic ploy, which relied on raw European power, never took off in the way Ledochowski had intended, thwarted by the outbreak of war. By the time the dust had settled, the world had moved on. Newly independent Muslim-majority nations, having flung off the yoke of their former colonial masters, would make such blatant missionary work all but impossible; already in the offing was a freshly assertive Islam. As things turned out, the one practical outcome of the General's letter was the establishment of a course in Islamics at the Pontifical Oriental Institute in Rome.

But Ledochowski's idea of training a generation of Jesuits as specialists in Islam lingered on, even if the style of their engagement would turn out not to be polemically confrontational but dialogical. A group of inspiring Catholics would now come to the fore whose example instilled into this new generation a genuine desire to study the Islamic tradition in depth: the Cistercian Blessed Charles de Foucauld (1858-1916), the great French Islamicist, Louis Massignon (1883 – 1962) and the Spanish priest and expert in Islamic spirituality, Miguel Asín Palacios (1871-1944).

By the latter half of the twentieth century, the fruits of this new engagement were already palpable. Some Jesuits had studied Sufism. Paul Nwya's work on the mystic Ibn Abbād of Ronda stands out as a fine example, consummated in a remarkable book on Qur'anic exegesis and the language of mysticism, published in 1969. Still very much alive is an Australian Jesuit, Paul Jackson, who has spent the latter half of his life in India working on the letters of a Sufi saint, Sharfuddin Ahmed Yahya Maneri, whose splendid shrine can be seen in Biharsharif.

Others have explored the question of the reform of modern Islam. The German scholar, [Christian Troll](#), was inspired by a plea from a Dutch Jesuit, J.J. Houben, calling for Islamic renewal and suggesting that Catholics were in a position to help. His experience of the Second Vatican Council's inner tensions between conservatives and reformers led him to look at the inner dynamics at work in the Muslim world. Troll's book on the Indian reformer, Sir Syed Ahmed Khan, remains the standard text on his theology. Alongside him is an Egyptian Jesuit, Samir Khalil Samir, who has worked for decades on the patrimony of Eastern Christianity and so finds

himself regularly writing about Islam with a particular concern for its engagement with modern values.

There are experts, too, in dialogue with Muslims. I think of [Thomas Michel](#), an American Jesuit who worked for many years in Indonesia before being sent to work at the Curia of Pope St John Paul II, the Pontiff who did more than any other to build bonds of friendship between the Church and Muslims. Then there is [Daniel Madigan](#), another Australian, whose interest in Islam started during his time in Pakistan. He pursued an interest in Qur'anic studies and taught at the Pontifical Gregorian University in Rome for some time, and now teaches at Georgetown University in the States. From there, he directs a uniquely fruitful dialogue: an annual series of encounters between Muslim and Christian scholars called '[Building Bridges](#)'. Felix Körner, a German Jesuit, took over Madigan's work with Muslims at the Gregorian and has published books on Qur'anic exegesis and Christian approaches to Islam.

Finally, and with particular gratitude, I want to mention a remarkable Italian Jesuit, Paolo Dall'Oglio. Unabashed admirer of Islam, he took the highly unusual step for a Jesuit of founding a monastery, Deir Mar Musa in Syria, as a place to live out a radical vision of hospitality at the service of Christian-Muslim encounter in the Middle East. Paolo was profoundly involved in the life of that latterly tormented country to the point that, during the outbreak of its civil war, he tried to negotiate with a then little-known group of Islamist extremists, ISIL. He was taken prisoner by them on 29 July 2013 and his fate is still unknown. Whether he is dead or alive, his story, I am convinced, is not yet over.

Today, there are some thirty or forty Jesuits around the world with advanced training of one sort or another in Islamics. Ignatius would surely be pleased, recognising that, after some 500 years, we are now rather better equipped than he was to accomplish a task that moved and inspired him. Where is the journey taking us? Who knows? We are no more able than Ignatius was in his day to escape the horizons of our time and to glimpse the possibilities that history will surely unfold. No matter; like him we try to discern the promptings of the Spirit day by day and follow them faithfully.

And the Spirit is key here at another level. Had he been around to celebrate his half millennium, I feel sure Ignatius would have sensed in Pope St John Paul II's *Redemptoris Missio* (1990) a supremely Ignatian intuition but applied in a way Ignatius's age would never have allowed:

The Spirit manifests himself in a special way in the Church and in her members. Nevertheless, his presence and activity are universal, limited neither by space nor time. [...] The Spirit's presence and activity affect not only the individuals but also *society and history, peoples, cultures and religions*. Indeed, the Spirit is at the origin of the noble ideals and undertakings which benefit humanity on its journey through history.⁵

This is a profoundly healthy point of departure for the encounter with Islam he always sought but never achieved. Let's hope that on this, his feast day, gratified to find his sons applying their hearts and minds to his great dream, he continues to support them with the prayers of a great and holy founder.

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¹ See his "Admonition to prayer against the Turks" of October 1541. For more on Luther and Islam, see Mark U. Edwards, *Luther's Last Battles: politics and polemics 1531-46*, Leiden: Brill, 1983, pp.97-114.

² Another source suggests that the idea came to him later on in Barcelona. See Antonio Albuquerque, *Diego Laínez S.J. Primer Biógrafo de San Ignacio*, Bilbao: Mensajero/Sal Terrae, 2005, p.150.

³ This is not stated in the official *Autobiography* but in sketches made by Laínez and Polanco. See Albuquerque, pp.151-2.

⁴ "Ignatius and the Turks. Two Letters from 1552", *The Way*, 211 (July 2006): 363-78. Available online at <http://www.theway.org.uk/Back/453Ignatius.pdf> [consulted 2nd June 2016]

⁵ *Redemptoris Missio* 28. Emphasis added.