


Article

Wanwuyiti and Finding God in All Things: A Comparative Study between Neo-Confucian Self-Cultivation and Ignatian Spirituality

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Abstract: It seems that the early Jesuits misinterpreted the key Neo-Confucian terms *taiji/li* from an Aristotelian perspective in the seventeenth century, thereby leading to a dialogical failure in their initial encounter with Neo-Confucian tradition. What necessitates interreligious dialogue today is a pluralistic stance that deems all religious quests worthy in their own context. Therefore, this paper renews the dialogue between two spiritual traditions, long overdue, by reading two representative texts, side by side, from each tradition on self-cultivation: *Reflections on Things at Hand* (twelfth century) and *The Spiritual Exercises* (sixteenth century). The comparison showcases that the notion of “*wanwuyiti*”, a concomitant of the Confucian *ren*, is tantamount to a religious imperative for human ethical engagements, and the Ignatian axiom “*Finding God in All Things*” energizes a spiritual self-transformation to forge an intimate bond with God and the world. While Neo-Confucian cultivation focuses on the removal of desires, seeking to maintain “equilibrium” and “centrality”, the Ignatian exercises foreground commitment to “discernment” and “indifference”. The Neo-Confucians address human and worldly affairs in a procedural manner, with ever-broadening horizons, to establish an orderly society. In contrast, the Ignatian self is directed toward an orderly life to serve, love, and bring ever more to God’s Divine Majesty.

Keywords: *wanwuyiti*; *Finding God in All Things*; Neo-Confucian self-cultivation; Ignatian spirituality



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1. Introduction

It was generally recognized by the European Jesuit missionaries in China in the seventeenth century that the teachings of Neo-Confucianism were materialistic at best, and the theory on the Supreme Ultimate (*li*) deviated from the notions of the Lord of Heaven in classical Confucianism (Ricci et al. 1985). Therefore, as Julia Ching puts it, “[Neo-Confucianism] displaced what was to them a more agreeable universe of earlier *religious beliefs* in the Lord-on-High and Heaven... it has little to offer in the line of *religious thinking*” (Ching 2000, p. 4).

Part of this response, it seems, was elicited from Matteo Ricci, the founder of the China mission, who “inherited” and mistakenly applied the Jesuit critique of Japanese Buddhism to both Chinese Buddhism and Neo-Confucianism (Li and Mei 2014, p. 14). On that ground, the spiritual and religious dimensions of Neo-Confucianism were explicitly denied and repudiated by generations of Jesuits.

Although the early Jesuits have been at the forefront of interreligious encounters since the inception of the order, demonstrating extraordinary openness toward non-European cultures, their global-scale salvation movement seems to generate much less, if not entirely impossible, interreligious learning from their Neo-Confucian partners.¹ To put it otherwise, the Jesuits firmly held the belief that what was true and holy was only to be found within the Christian fold.

The Western perspective of truth has undergone a radical shift since the Enlightenment and the rise of modernity, leading to the creation of new paradigms for understand-

ing religious truth. The Second Vatican Council, in the twentieth century, marked the beginning of an era of global interreligious dialogue. Since then, the dialogue has gained momentum between Christianity and other world religions (Cornille 2013, p. xii-4). More recently, Erin Cline has argued that Ignatian spirituality can contribute to an interreligious dialogical exchange to enrich the spiritual lives of members of other religions (Cline 2018, p. 21).

The Jesuit theologian Roger Haight has also emphasized that Ignatian spirituality may chart a new path to enlighten spiritual seekers of religious or non-religious traditions (Haight 2012, pp. 25–26). Both Cline and Haight have offered new insights into how Ignatian spirituality could benefit spiritual seekers through a Christian lens.² In this article, I argue that a comparative study between Neo-Confucian and Ignatian spirituality might shed fresh light on and cross-fertilize spiritual cultivation between Neo-Confucian and Ignatian traditions.

In so doing, an important question has to be addressed first: whether (Neo-)Confucianism is a religion and whether there is Neo-Confucian spirituality. As this is debated sometimes, a brief working definition is in order. My contention, following Frederick Streng, is that “religion” is “a means to ultimate transformation” that addresses existential questions (Streng 1985, p. 2). This definition is capacious enough to entertain a variety of religious phenomena. Likewise, “spirituality” is the fundamental organization of human lives and the core that provides coherence to human existence, incorporating transcendence, ultimacy, and individual life experience (Haight 2012, p. xix).

Based on these premises, this study builds a comparative enterprise centering on two representative texts that seek to cultivate and fulfill, ideally, the fullest human potential: *Reflections on Things at Hand* (近思录, hereafter *Reflections*, Zhu and Lü n.d.) assembled by Zhu Xi (1130–1200) and Lü Zuqian (1137–1181) between 1175 and 1178, and *The Spiritual Exercises* (SE) of Ignatius of Loyola published in 1548.³ To be clear, *Reflections* and SE vary in terms of rhetoric, content, and style. While *Reflections* was composed to provide beginners with a primer with the essentials of the Neo-Confucian Cheng-Zhu school’s method of self-cultivation (Tillman 1992, p. 215), SE has been an essential manual to Ignatian spirituality, highlighting an individual’s election or choice of life in line with the will of God. Despite that, there are shared principles, attitudes, and mechanisms of self-cultivation that assist spiritual seekers to discipline and conquer the self, leading to a dialogue of spirituality⁴ based on our common humanity and its finitude, as Haight has opined that “the humanity of Jesus is the key to his approachability, communicability, and universal relevance” (Haight 2012, p. 89).

2. The Neo-Confucianism Movement and *Reflections*

The Neo-Confucian movement was a revival of Confucianism in the Sung Dynasty (960–1279). The pre-Sung culture was characterized by the coexistence of the enormous popularity of Buddhism and the catastrophic moral degradation among the Chinese. The early Sung Confucians begged the question of whether Chinese Buddhism contributed to a moral (healthy) society (Mo 2003; Chen 2010). They felt an intense need to reassert traditional moral-cultural values and that “their response to social needs assumed the character of a religious mission”.⁵

To revive the orthodox Confucian Dao, the Neo-Confucians learned metaphysics and meditation from their Buddhist enemies. They have shown their originality by rediscovering and reinterpreting *li* as a fundamental tenet underlying the entire realm of the universe.⁶ In the dual *li-qi* scheme, the *li* signifies coherence, or “the valuable, intelligible way that things fit together” (Angle 2009, p. 32). By contrast, the *qi* (vital breath) is concrete. Things with visible outlines come into existence as the *qi* assembles and perish as it disperses. There is an ontological co-dependence of *li* and *qi* as well as an asymmetrical dependence in which *li* has explanatory priority (Angle and Tiwald 2017, p. 40).

Reflections comprises fourteen chapters and 622 sections. The first part, Chapter One, provides an “ontology of Dao”. Chapters Two to Thirteen involve a comprehensive self-

cultivation scheme, encompassing subjects ranging from self-discipline to public service. The last chapter is a Confucian hagiography in which the authors exalted sages and worthies who took pains to live up to the principles of an ethical life.

2.1. *Wanwuyiti*⁷ and *Ren*: A Moral Ontology

The crux of Neo-Confucian metaphysics lies in the notion that all things in existence constitute a single body, *wanwuyiti*, which can be traced to the classical period. Mencius (372–289 BCE) and Zhuangzi (late 4th century BC), for example, have both stated the idea of oneness between the self and all other things.⁸ But it was among the early Sung Neo-Confucians that the idea of *wanwuyiti* rose to prominence.

Although Zhu Xi was the most famous Neo-Confucian, due credit should be given to the Cheng brothers, particularly the “truly creative figure” (Graham 1992, p. xxi), Cheng Yi (1033–1107), who reformulated and elaborated the concept of *li*. For the Cheng brothers, all affairs (*shi*) and matters (*wu*) form one body, and once a thing is produced, it possesses the *li* to complete it. Human beings can extend the principle to others, but because their endowment of *qi* may be dark and turbid, they are unable to do so.

To state otherwise, while all people partake in the same *li*, their *qi* is uneven. Indeed, the notion of *wanwuyiti* is predicated on the *li–qi* scheme. Simply put, *li* is the “principle” of all things, which is manifested more or less clearly or completely in particular things according to their endowment of *qi*, serving as that thing’s true nature. It is this principle (*li*) that is also the intrinsically good nature of human beings, which is revealed as an aspect or condition of their minds. Each thing has its own *li*, but all of these *li* are really one Principle (*li*), the “Great Ultimate (*taiji*), which is thus both one and many” (Ziporyn 2008, p. 401).

In the same vein, Zhang Zai (1020–1077) argued that the universe is one, but its manifestations are many. An important extrapolation of *wanwuyiti* is the statement that proclaims *ren* to be the highest virtue among all.⁹ *Ren*, as a core value in the ancient Confucian tradition, is the overarching quality that encompasses other virtues such as righteousness, propriety, wisdom, and trustworthiness. Prior to the Cheng brothers, Zhang Zai sought to postulate *wanwuyiti* as an ontological basis of *ren* in his *Western Inscription*:

“Heaven is my father, and Earth is my mother, and even such a small creature as I find an intimate place in their midst. Therefore, that which fills the universe I regard as my body, and that which directs the universe I consider as my nature. All people are my brothers and sisters, and all things are my companions...Respect the aged...Show deep love toward the orphaned and the weak”. (Zhu et al. 1967, 2/89)

Using an analogy of familial relationships, this passage depicts Heaven and Earth as universal parents who love all, and all things are united in brotherly love. Likewise, the notion of *ren* is discussed exhaustively in the first chapter of *Reflections* and the term appears thirty-one times in the entire text. All of the early Sung masters have offered their interpretation of *ren*. Among them were the Cheng brothers, who expounded it more fully (Cheng et al. n.d.). Their exegesis consists of the role, nature, character, and function of *ren*. For instance, Cheng Hao elucidates the substance of *ren* by using the following metaphor:

“Books on medicine describe paralysis of the four limbs as the absence of humanity [*ren*]...The man of humanity regards Heaven and Earth and all things as one body. To him, there is nothing that is not himself. Since he has recognized all things as himself, can there be any limit to his humanity? ... To be able to judge others by what is in ourselves may be called the method of realizing humanity. The hope was that by looking at it this way we might get at the substance of humanity”. (Zhu et al. 1967, 1/20)

The substance of *ren*, in Cheng Yi’s words, arises from the idea of *wanwuyiti*—the interconnectedness of the self and every other being. To have *ren* is to sympathize, and the *ren* that is extended to the utmost is realized when the distinction between the self and the

other is effaced. When queried by disciples, Cheng Yi further identifies *ren* with “universal impartiality”, suggesting that one “regard oneself and another as one, to be impartial and not selfish” (Zhu et al. 1967, 1/11). For Zhu Xi, *ren* refers to the original state; i.e., the principle is always present, but it is seen most clearly in a not-yet-manifested state—when things begin to grow and its purity has not been diffused (Zhu et al. 1967, 1/23). Cheng Yi draws important distinctions among *ren*, love, and commiseration:

“The feeling of commiseration is what we call *ren*...later scholars have therefore considered love to be humanity. But love is a feeling, whereas humanity is nature. How can love be taken exclusively as humanity? ... commiseration [is] the beginning of humanity... [but it] should not be called humanity itself...A man of humanity, of course, loves universally. But one may not therefore regard universal love as humanity”. (Zhu et al. 1967, 1/20)

Therein, *ren* is, first of all, in unity with all things. It is also an altruistic principle in human nature (Graham 1992, p. 96), which is reflected in the passion expressed by the feelings of sympathy, commiseration, and love for others. *Ren* is manifested in the spirit of life and identified with pure origination.

Aside from Cheng Yi and Zhu Xi, Wang Yangming, the prominent Ming Neo-Confucian scholar, further explained the substance and function of *wanwuyiti*. In his commentary on the *Great Learning*, Wang asserted that there were great men who regard Heaven and Earth and all things as one body, the world was like one family, and the country was like one person (Chan 1969, p. 659). Underlying the way of the *Great Learning* is the substance of *wanwuyiti*—to manifest the bright virtue of mankind, while the function of *wanwuyiti* is manifested through love and care towards all people (Wang n.d.).

Wang argued that love toward one’s father could be extended to that of all fathers. Love and compassion should not be confined to the Five Confucian Relationships: it can be extended to all sentient and non-sentient beings, even to shattered tiles and crushed stones—one cannot help a feeling of regret for them. The mind of the great man will be divided and narrow only if it is obscured by selfish desires. In this way, one cannot manifest his bright virtue to restore the original condition of forming one body with all things (Chan 1969, p. 660).

From Zhang Zai, to Cheng brothers, to Zhu Xi, and to Wang Yangming, the Sung and Ming Neo-Confucians arrived at a consensus on the significance of the notion of *wanwuyiti*—it does not so much construe a coherent universe as to provide a supernatural framework that made morality and ethics imperative for the human world. When the great man fulfills this Heaven-endowed nature, humanity (*ren*) will manifest in one’s dealings with all things and affairs. It is precisely at this point that the Jesuits in the seventeenth century failed to recognize that the Neo-Confucian notion of *wanwuyiti* is not merely a metaphysical proposition. Rather, it signifies the interconnectedness of all things.

2.2. Internal Cultivation: The Right Attitude and Means

The principles and methods of internal cultivation can be derived mainly from Chapters Two to Five. This part engages the “investigation of things”, “preserving the mind and nourishing nature”, and self-discipline. Learners are advised to adopt the right attitude, practice, and methodology, and the problem of desire lies at the heart of internal cultivation.

One pair of correlates on the attitude and methodology of internal cultivation is expressed in the sayings “reverent composure (*jing* 敬) is to straighten the internal life” and “regarding tranquility (*jing* 靜) as fundamental”. Cheng Hao defines reverent composure as a method to govern oneself (Zhu et al. 1967, 2/61). A.C. Graham holds that there are two layers of meaning of *jing* 敬: to collect oneself, to be attentive to persons or things on one level, and to respect them and take them seriously on the other (Graham 1992, pp. 68–69). The Cheng brothers further expounded that if one assumes the attitude of *jing* 敬, they have the unity of mind to attain mental calmness and behave correctly. As Joe Adler indicates, *Jing* 敬 is the experiential ground or orientation for both mental activity and stillness (Adler 2014, p. 108).

To be able to maintain Jing 敬, one is advised to seek tranquility 静. Chapter Four places tranquility at the center of nurturing the mind and nature. In the first section, Zhou Dunyi stated that tranquility led to intelligence and penetration. Cheng Yi then elaborated, according to the fu (to return) hexagram from the *Book of Changes*, that the principle of nature inherent in human beings is very subtle. There must not be any selfish desire to disturb it, and it will proceed to operate smoothly. Being tranquil means being free from the impurities of selfishness and rashness. Next, when one's mind is tranquil and filled with the feeling of production and reproduction that characterizes Heaven and Earth, one will identify with *ren* and be overwhelmed with feelings of love (Zhu et al. 1967, 4/1).

A concrete practice to stay tranquil is quiet-sitting, a Neo-Confucian form of meditation. The Cheng brothers recommended this, and those who practice quiet-sitting were extolled as skilled in learning, as “when there is nothing to put into practice, go and do quiet-sitting... we can cultivate our original mind and become calm to some degree” (Zhu et al. 1967, 4/63). Despite the Cheng brothers' practice of quiet-sitting, Zhu Xi only mentioned it twice in the whole text, suggesting that it was a means to an end—learning and quiet-sitting are complementary daily practices that nurture the mind.¹⁰

Whether to maintain reverent composure or seek tranquility, the removal of desire plays a major role. Except for four chapters, all the rest discuss the problem of desire. In Chapter Five, “Self-discipline”, we were informed that human beings were grappling with various desires: those of material objects, those of benefit, and those of human craving. Desire arises as a result of the effect of negative forces (the yin) and the endowment of turbid *qi*. We can moderately satisfy the desires necessary to sustain life, but we should deal with the selfish ones in three steps: restrain, reduce, and remove entirely. The last goal, as Zhu Xi implied, is attainable only by the sages.

Below is an interesting dialogue between Zhou Dunyi and his disciples. “Can one become a sage through learning?” Master Lien-hsi (Zhou Dunyi) said, “Yes”. “Is there any essential way?” “Yes”. “Please explain it to me”. “The essential way is to concentrate on one thing. Concentrating on one thing means having no desire...” The implication is twofold: The importance of removing desire can never be underestimated since it is directly related to attaining sagehood; sagehood, despite its elusiveness, is accessible and seemingly straightforward.

To remove a particular type of desire, that of pleasure and comfort, there is a technique that could be described as “knowing when to stop”. In Chapter Twelve, Section Three, Cheng Yi argues that most people have an inclination toward pleasure and comfort, and they are reluctant and slow to give it up. If one does not know the wisdom to stop at the right time, they may become accustomed to feelings of security and wealth, leading to pride, extravagance, and, finally, disorder in life. Therefore, when one is in a comfortable condition, one should stay alert and not indulge in it. Sages, by contrast, can stop at the right time (Zhu et al. 1967, 5/8). In the same chapter, Cheng Yi suggests that as soon as one is pleased, one should stop, precisely when one enjoys pleasure and comfort to the fullest. The key to internal cultivation seems to be adopting the right attitude and practical strategy, such as fostering the habit of “knowing when to stop”.

2.3. External Cultivation: A Procedural Morality

When one has interiorized the inner values, ways of external self-cultivation offer concrete procedures to rectify one's behavior. Chapter Five, “Self-Discipline”, deemed the following four steps necessary: improving oneself; correcting mistakes; mastering the self; and returning to propriety. When it comes to correcting mistakes, Zhou Dunyi advised that “the superior man (junzi) is active and vigilant and is unceasing in his sincerity”. But he must “restrain his wrath, repress his desires...move toward good... and correct his mistakes before he can achieve his objective”. What “mistakes” are referred to are less clarified. The following statements by Cheng Yi specify the nature of mistakes.

“The mistakes of men follow the group to which they belong. A superior man is often mistaken for being liberal, while an inferior man is often mistaken for being

stingy. The superior man is excessive in love, while the inferior men suffer from ruthlessness;" "... to reduce mistakes [is] to abide in the Mean and to reduce what is superficial and secondary...All the harm in the world comes from the superiority of the secondary... when... fundamental (material) needs are carried too far...harmful". (Zhu et al. 1967, 5/6)

Cheng Yi implies here that mistakes are contextual and quantitatively measured, depending on one's moral identity and social role. Unable to recognize what is fundamental and primary for human living, people made mistakes when they raised the secondary to the primary. Further, mistakes mainly involve those acts that are contrary to the requirements of social etiquette and rites.

Whether to correct the mistakes or rectify the mind, an important goal is to "return to propriety". Zhou Dunyi and the Cheng brothers all reiterate Yan Yuan's sayings about propriety (ritual) that one "did not look at what was contrary to propriety, did not listen to what was contrary to propriety, did not speak what was contrary to propriety, and did not make any movement that was contrary to propriety" (Zhu et al. 1967, 2/5). Cheng Yi holds that seeing, listening, speaking, and acting are functions of the body, manifesting what is within oneself. Controlling external behaviors will, in return, nourish internal ones (Zhu et al. 1967, 5/3). It seems that one's deportment and demeanor are a significant part of our cultivation that is conducive to a world of order.

Apart from "things at hand", external cultivation also involves the actual affairs of the world and the relationship between the self and other(s). The cultivation of affairs extends from the personal, the familial, the community, and the state to all under Heaven, increasingly decentralized from the self. Zhu Xi describes basic behavioral learning as "sprinkling and sweeping the floor, knowing how to greet people, and how to correctly answer their questions". For Neo-Confucians, the path toward sagehood began with lesser learning—daily conventions, etiquette, and norms.

The cultivation of filial piety, brotherly respect, loyalty, and proper behavior derived from ceremonies and music follows the lesser learning. These are oriented to shape a learner so he/she chooses the good and cultivates the self until, ultimately, the whole world is transformed and brought to perfection, the aim of greater learning. The individual must be cultivated at an orderly pace: rectifying one's mind and behavior, dealing with human relationships, taking part in public service, and pacifying the world. At last, society at large and the individual are harmonized in unity.

Throughout *Reflections*, there is a tension between sagehood¹¹ as a viable goal and the scarcity of sages. Although the masters explicitly state that one can be a sage through moral learning, they nevertheless warrant the lofty status to only a very few ancient kings and Confucius. Still, they suggest that even if one cannot make it to sagehood, there is a chance that one can be a "worthy", a "superior man (junzi)", an eminent scholar, and so forth. These are still commendable fruits of any self-cultivation effort.

2.4. Equilibrium and Harmony

One guiding principle overwhelmingly persistent in both internal and external self-cultivation is called "equilibrium" (*zhong*), which means "the middle" or "the mean". The term "*zhong*" generates two derivatives: "centrality and correctness" (*zhongzheng*) and "the middle way" (*zhongdao*). The Confucian classic *The Doctrine of Mean* describes "*zhong*" as the state before feelings of pleasure, anger, sorrow, and joy are aroused (not-yet-manifested)—absolute quietness, while the state when feelings are aroused and each attains due measure and degree is called "harmony".

However, Zhou Dunyi reinterpreted equilibrium as "the Mean is harmony. The Mean is the principle of regularity, the universally recognized law of morality, and is that which the sage is devoted to" (Zhu et al. 1967, 11/1). Here, what equilibrium (*zhong*) entails is changing from the stillness of the mind to the activity of the mind in a balanced state. Thus, Zhu Xi's adoption of Zhou Dunyi's reinterpretation created what Adler termed the "interpenetration of mental activity and stillness" (Adler 2014, p. 43). For Zhu Xi, equilibrium

has to be a middle ground in action/activism rather than the stillness/quietude that is down the slippery slope toward Buddhism and Daoism. The Neo-Confucian self-cultivation not only aims to transform the individual, but also to make an orderly society; that is, internal cultivation must be oriented toward external cultivation—action in the world, equilibrium being the nexus between the two.

Discussion on equilibrium abounds in every chapter of *Reflections*. First, equilibrium is equivalent to harmony, and all things and affairs embody this nature in their inception. To seek equilibrium is to seek the mean of human desires and feelings, but to maintain equilibrium is the most difficult. Chen Yi describes it this way:

“The word is most difficult to understand. It must be understood silently and apprehended in one’s mind. Take the living room. Its center is the zhong, but in the whole house, the zhong is not the center of the living room but is the central hall...Other cases can be inferred analogically”. “One must achieve the Mean according to the circumstances. To balance means to weigh. What is to be the balance? It is righteousness and timeliness”. (Zhu et al. 1967, 1/30; 3/64)

To arrive at the mean, one needs to see things in perspective. The mean is also subject to timeliness and righteousness. Cheng Hao argues that the mind has constant internal conflicts between the good and evil forces. If one keeps a strong will, the vital breath cannot disturb him/her: one can readily see the conflicts and find the mean. In addition, one’s virtues should be compatible with his social role and status. Frequently, the masters warn that a morally inferior individual should not assume the duty of a superior, in that this will keep him/her out of balance (Zhu et al. 1967, 10/8).

This echoes what the *Doctrine of Mean* has proposed: “The noble person acts according to his position in life and does not desire what is beyond it...the noble person can find no situation in which he is not himself. When holding a superior position, he does not treat his inferiors with contempt. When holding a low position, he does not try to get in good with his superior” (Legge 1882, pp. 395–96). To conclude, strong will, persistent learning, and insight help one attain the mean. The mean is also to be achieved with a clear self-understanding of one’s moral caliber.

The Neo-Confucian self-cultivation aims for “sageliness within and kingliness without”, achieving wisdom and benevolence and positively influencing the construction of a moral society. Sung-era Neo-Confucian adherents either established academies of learning or dedicated themselves to serving the public.

3. Ignatius of Loyola and the *Spiritual Exercises*

While the construction of Neo-Confucian spiritual narrative began with a group of early-Sung scholars, the genesis of Ignatian narrative unfolded with the life story of Ignatius of Loyola (1491–1556), founder of the Society of Jesus¹² at a time when the Latin Church was challenged by new theologies and “jostled for orthodoxy amidst a growing array of churches and sects” (Hsia 2004, p. xii).

Contrary to the popular image of a staunch defender of the papacy and Church, recent developments in scholarship confirmed that Ignatius and his spirituality were shaped during a period when there was no precise boundary between orthodoxy and heresy and the concerns of the Counter-Reformation church did not profoundly influence him between his conversion and the founding of the Order (O’Reilly 2021, pp. 5. 37).

Born into a noble family in the Basque region of Spain, Ignatius was trained to be a courtier from an early age. He described himself as a man given to the vanities of the world before the age of twenty-six. However, a battle in 1521 changed everything. Ignatius was wounded and sent home to recuperate. During the long recovery, the only literature available was two religious works: a collection of the saints known as the *Golden Legend* and the *Life of Christ* (Haight 2012, pp. 3–13).

Reading religious books converted Ignatius, and he became a changed man who chose to do God’s will and take the same path as the saints whose stories he had read so many times. Ignatius’ conversion was a determinant in shaping his later life and the entire spir-

itual tradition named after him. His spiritual journey was further enriched by a great illumination at Manresa and other places. Thinking that his spiritual experience might be useful to others, he recollected and wrote *SE*. The booklet was published in 1548, after some twenty years of elaboration,¹³ but it was used long before to nourish Christian spiritual life. Ignatius explicitly stated that the purpose of writing is to provide

“every method of examination of conscience, of meditation, of contemplation... For as to go for a walk... are bodily exercises, so in like manner all methods of preparing and disposing the soul to rid itself of all inordinate affections, and, after it has rid itself of them, to seek and to find the will of God in the ordering of one’s life with a view to the salvation of one’s souls”. (Longridge and Acquaviva 1955, p. 4)

The text is a manual to guide exercises carried out by a retreatant and a director. Based on Ignatius’s experience, it is oriented toward an election or choice of a state of life that helps mankind to live more fully in their embraced lifestyle. While all Jesuit novices have to take the exercises, others are also encouraged to practice it. In particular, Ignatius distinguished three types of retreatants: the not-fully qualified, those qualified yet hindered by obligations, and the fully qualified. Consequently, there are three ways of giving exercises, in part or whole (Longridge and Acquaviva 1955, p. 126).

The first part of *SE* consists of twenty “Annotations” and the “Principle and Foundation;” the second part is “Four Weeks of Exercises;” and the last part comprises suggestions on a variety of topics. In addition, under the generality of Claudio Acquaviva (1543–1615), an official directory of the Exercises was issued in 1599, offering directors advice on adding, withdrawing, or improving the practice. The main component of *SE*, a four-week retreat that spans thirty days, usually consists of “the purgative way”, in which the retreatant meditates on his/her sins (week one); “the illuminative way”, in which the retreatant contemplates the incarnation, the nativity, and the hidden life of Christ (week two); and “the unitive way”, in which the retreatant associates himself/herself with Christ in his sufferings (week three) and his joys (week four) and finally establishes an intimate union with God through Christ. The last part offers methods of prayer, meditation, rules for spirit discernment, and so forth.

3.1. The Principle and Foundation of Spiritual Exercises

The first week begins with “Principle and Foundation”, where Ignatius defines the central soteriological theme and the most important principle in Christian spiritual formation. W. H. Longridge commented that all of the subsequent teachings of the *Exercises* follow this (Longridge and Acquaviva 1955, p. 19). Like the Neo-Confucian first principle of *li*, the principle is self-evident, requiring no proof.

Though the articulation of the principle is pithy, the meaning is profound: human beings were created to praise and serve God to save their souls. Other things were created to help him/her achieve this goal. One may seek external aid only if other things facilitate serving God. Thereupon, we should be indifferent to all created things in such a way that we do not “wish for health rather than sickness, for wealth rather than poverty, for honor rather than dishonor, for a long life rather than a short one... desiring and choosing only that which leads us more directly to the end for which we were created” (Longridge and Acquaviva 1955, p. 26).

The “Principle and Foundation” offers four propositions: the end for which all humans are created; the end of creatures and things in relation to human beings; the human usage of creatures and things; and the necessity of indifference (Longridge and Acquaviva 1955, p. 27). First, the end of all people is to praise and bring glory to God. This is because, as George Ganss argued, Ignatius’s entire worldview was based on “God’s plan of creating free human beings for his glory and their beatitude” (Ganss 1992, p. 201). Longridge interprets “to praise” not only as in words, but also in living or acting for the glory of God. Salvation comes as a secondary aim, denoting not merely the escape from damnation, but the highest moral perfection (Longridge and Acquaviva 1955, p. 205). Again, the salvation

of one's soul is associated with the service of God. Ignatius adds that the means to human perfection is through the ordering of one's life, which is often perturbed by a human being's inordinate affections.

The "creature and other things" denotes everything between one's ego and God, such as material possessions, time, friends, one's activity, abilities, and even many natural gifts that one is born with (Rahner and Baker 2014, p. 19). One should separate himself/herself from these "other things" to free the ego. Only through mastery over other things can one remove the inordinate affections. Taken at face value, the proposition about indifference is confounding: should one not wish for health, wealth, honor, and a long life? Admittedly, Ignatius claims that if these other things hinder us from realizing our end, we should be indifferent to them, which entails the conquering of the self to act with freedom according to reason and the will of God (Longridge and Acquaviva 1955, p. 29). What indifference implies is akin to detachment from external desires or neutrality toward objects of thought that would normally produce emotional reactions (Newman 1996, p. 58).

Longridge suggests that the retreatant rids themselves of desires by intentionally acting diametrically against them so as to establish an equilibrium of affections. Further, apart from the indifference toward desire or aversion to created things, there should be a desire for what God wills (Longridge and Acquaviva 1955, p. 30). According to Hugo Rahner, the foundation of Ignatian indifference lies in the belief that only God is worthy of love, while all other creatures fall into the eclipse of God (Rahner 1968, p. 24). The struggle against worldly desire, therefore, can be a complex journey that navigates through indifference, resistance, and a strong yearning for divine guidance.

3.2. The Discernment of Spirits

The discernment of the spirits is an important part of *SE*. There are two sets of rules (*SE*, 314–336) for weeks one and two, respectively, centered on "a study of regimens for transforming emotions" (Newman 1996, p. 52). Longridge argued that discernment helps examine the soul-moving spirits and the movement itself to distinguish between what is desired and what is not.

There are two types of movement from without: the one from God—illuminations, inspirations, and divine motions and the one from the devil—evil thoughts, desires, scruples, and false reasonings. The two ways of interior perception are also called "consolation" and "desolation". Consolation is described as follows:

"When an interior movement is aroused in the soul, it is inflamed with the love of its Creator and Lord. As a result, it can love no created thing on the face of the earth for its own sake, but only in the Creator of them all... I call consolation every increase of hope, faith, and charity, and all interior joy which calls and attracts the soul to heavenly things, and its salvation, rendering it quiet and at peace in its Creator and Lord". (*SE*, 316)

Consolation was explained as a supernaturally granted spiritual affection that readily generated acts of virtue, followed by positive affections that overshadowed works of the flesh (Longridge and Acquaviva 1955, p. 325). The manifestation of consolation varied from peace, and interior quiet to spiritual joy and so forth. Desolation, on the other hand, is depicted as "darkness and confusion of soul, attraction towards based and earthly objects, disquietude caused by various agitations and temptations" (Longridge and Acquaviva 1955, p. 186). When in desolation, negative emotions such as sadness, depression, and aridity arise. One will then experience disquiet in the mind and crave earthly things.

In week one, most rules of discernment focus on the problem of desolation. Ignatius insists that one stay firm in the pre-desolation resolution and exercise greater self-discipline to deal with it, e.g., insist more on prayer, self-examination, and the practice of penance. The retreatant is generally advised to follow the example of Jesus Christ.

Three factors contribute to desolation: human sloth and negligence; the trial from God; and the understanding that only God can provide spiritual consolation (*SE*, 322). Nevertheless, with grace from God, one is capable of resisting enemies that tempt him/her

to desolation. Three interesting analogies were used to characterize the enemies: a woman, a false lover, and a commander, meaning that the enemies appear strong but are weak; they are deceitful and hidden; and they attack through human weakness.

In week two and afterward, the focus shifts to the distinction between good and false consolation. In this way, the rules of discernment are fuller (Longridge and Acquaviva 1955, p. 190). For example, in rules three and four, it is suggested that what appears good may derive from the deceit of evil. To distinguish the workings of the devil, there is a twofold criterion: the end that the thought tends to and the state of the soul that it causes (Longridge and Acquaviva 1955, p. 192).

John Newman has offered a useful perspective on the rules of discernment. The discernment of spirit draws emotions into a framework of concentrated attention and allows for their alteration through cognitive examination. Factual or evaluative beliefs and evaluations essentially constitute emotions, making them cognitive in nature. Consequently, the distinction between emotions is analogous to that between their respective cognitive contents. When emotions are mistaken or disordered, one can alter their cognitive contents (e.g., evaluative beliefs) to conform to their proper objects (Newman 1996, pp. 5–12). The proper object is undoubtedly the service and praise of God, and the love of God.

3.3. *The Use of Imagination in Interior Cultivation*

Whether through the rules of discernment or the choice of a state of life, *SE* seeks to provide a sense of the immediate presence of God and union with God, mediated through an intimate companionship with Jesus of Nazareth. Ignatius inherited a medieval tradition where there used to be a sense of a wholly integrated universe, society, and personal life. An individual's intimacy with God and a sense of belonging are taken for granted. Such a sense of intimacy, regrettably, has to be cultivated for a retreatant today (Hellwig 2008, pp. 50–58).

There are two primary means of cultivation in the Christian tradition: *via positiva* or *via negativa*—either with the aid of senses, imagination, and intellect or without them. Ignatius opts for the former, positive theology, and therein the retreatant is to cultivate visual and sensory imagination in prayers, to contemplate gospel scenes, entering into them in imagination, to play a role, to come to a relationship of affection with Jesus, his family, etc. (Hellwig 2008, pp. 50–58).

From the beginning of the first exercise, the retreatant is required to use the three powers of the soul in meditation: memory, understanding, and will. To memory, Ignatius ascribes a calling to the mind of facts in gospel stories. Understanding is assigned to reason, and deductions are made tending toward a practical end. Will involves focusing on the object of meditation and directing the movement of the affections. These three powers are not separated from each other. Rather, they are integrated into one imaginative process (Longridge and Acquaviva 1955, p. 209). An Ignatian meditation is based on a regular structure: a preparatory prayer, the preludes, the principle points, and an ending colloquy. Take the meditation of hell (week one, the fifth exercise) as an example. Ignatius wrote:

“The first prelude is a composition of place, which is here to see with the eyes of the imagination the length, breadth, and depth of hell. The second is to ask for that which I desire. It will be here to ask for an interior sense of the pain...The first point will be to see with the eyes of the imagination those great fires, and the souls as it were in bodies of fire. The second is to hear with the ears the wailings, the groans, the cries, the blasphemies against Christ our Lord, and all His saints. The third is to smell with the sense of smell the smoke, the brimstone, the filth, and the corruption. The fourth is to taste with the sense of taste bitter things, such as tears, sadness, and the worm of conscience. The fifth is to feel with the sense of touch how those fires touch and burn the souls”. (*SE* 65–70)

As the retreatant visualizes and imagines, he “sees” hell through seeing, hearing, smelling, feeling, and touching, which Ignatius described as the “application of senses”. With photographic memories, the hellish torment seemed to be alive and immanent in the

here and now, for Ignatius maintains that an interior sense of feeling the pains will “help one not to fall into sin”. Antonio De Nicolas delineates this as both “memory” and “powers of imagining”, a re-enactment of “the symbolic narratives of the past to feel the effects of one’s imagined present participation in the lives and events...of Christ and his disciples” (De Nicolas 1986, p. x).

The imaginative technologies derive from an oral tradition from Ignatius’s time. Though the will of God and the Trinitarian experience characterize Christianity, it has already happened and can only be recovered by imagination, memory, and love. The union between God and the soul can be opened only when one shifts from self-centeredness to attachment to the will of God (De Nicolas 1986, pp. 35–36).

As De Nicolas makes clear, Ignatius’s memory-making imagination is a combined effort of imagining and the removal of one’s familiar subjective or objective images. The retreatant was forced to create a pure image in which God’s signs would appear. By reading and writing sensation onto images, the retreatant articulates a language of its own to bring about a transformation in the human body—to make decisions, again, in line with the will of God (De Nicolas 1986, pp. 42–43).

3.4. *Finding God in All Things*

The idea of “*Finding God in All Things (FGAL)*” can be found in “Contemplation to Attain Love” at the end of *SE*, depicting the ultimate relationship between a human being and God. Ignatius proposes two things first: love will manifest itself in deeds rather than words; love is interchangeable between the beloved and the lover. The entire experience of *SE* encapsulates the connection between a human being and God, and the retreatant is expected to embody this relationship in their everyday existence.

In the preludes, the retreatant is asked to “see” God and “ask for” an interior knowledge of God’s generous endowment so he/she could love and serve in return. “The first point is to call to mind the benefits received from creation, redemption, and particular gifts... on my part... to offer and give to His Divine Majesty...all my possessions...Take, O Lord, and receive all my liberty, my memory, my understanding, and all my will, all I have and possess. Thou hast given all this to me; to Thee, O Lord, I restore it” (*SE*, 234).

The retreatant is also expected to contemplate the immanence of God in all things, God’s works in all things for the good of man, and the transcendence of God. Next, the retreatant offers all that he/she possesses to God and ends up loving and praising God in the purest and perfect love (Longridge and Acquaviva 1955, pp. 155–56). Ignatius wrote:

“The second point is to consider how God dwells in the creatures: in the elements, giving them being; in the plants, giving them growth; in the animals, giving them sensation; in men, giving them understanding...giving me being, life, sensation...The third is to consider how God works and labors on my behalf in all created things on the face of the earth”. (*SE*, 235)

In the last exercise, the exercitant surrenders himself/herself completely to God, realizing the give-and-take between humanity and God. It presents a way of finding God in all created things, including human beings themselves and all things in God. However, what are the deeds that Ignatius implies in this contemplation? Obviously, it is the apostolic service driven by Ignatius’ mystical illuminations and God-given impulses of love. He was inspired by the idea of serving God, promoting God’s glory, learning God’s will, and carrying it out—nothing less than to reform the entire world. Ignatius was a great realist, driven to seek and find God not in ideals, but in all things, including the political and social realms (Egan 1987, pp. 119–20).

In its way, Ignatius’ concern for Christian spiritual formation partially demonstrates the depth of response made by the Society of Jesus to the social-cultural needs of the time: the reform and re-evangelization of society and the propagation of Catholic faith on a global scale (Lewis 1996, pp. 112–27). The contribution of spiritual formation through *SE* to religious reform cannot be overlooked, because the early Jesuits tended to understand Reformation as primarily a pastoral problem related to the spirituality of the individuals,

to help the souls, and to the acceptance of the lived reality of God's action (O'Malley 1993, pp. 16–18).

Ignatius and his early companions showcase what it means to *Find God in All Things* not only in the interior, but also in the exterior. On the one hand, one could witness the multiple roles Ignatius played after his conversion as a pilgrim, student, religious leader, writer, saint, and mystic. On the other hand, aside from *SE*, the early Jesuits were involved in two programs of ministries: the ministry of Formula, including the word, sacrament, and works, and the establishment of schools (O'Malley 1993, pp. 85–90). They were not so much seeking interior discipline as finding the will of God and serving God as educators, missionaries, ministers, scientists, and so forth in their varied means of service to the entire world.

4. Observations and Discussions

Reading these two spiritual texts side by side, there are apparent resonances between the central theme of *wanwuyiti* and *Finding God in All Things*. First, both offer a supernatural framework that directs the self vis à vis the other and inspires actions rooted in the nature of ultimate reality—*ren* and love, and that the Neo-Confucian and Ignatian spiritual formation is closely associated with social and cultural transformations.

Wanwuyiti entails, ultimately, the position that there is no distinction between the self and every other being (or non-being) in such a way that *ren* evinces itself spontaneously. Just as the production and reproduction (生生) of Heaven and Earth are everlasting, so is the unity of *ren* with all things. This enduring belief in unity and harmony is translated into an individual moral scheme oriented toward *ren* and a return to the heavenly endowed human nature. Self-cultivation is not merely the interiorization of moral standards. Rather, the Neo-Confucians aspire to change society by transmitting Confucian Dao and elucidating its doctrines. On the communal level, the early Sung masters shared similar aspirations and life stories, e.g., committed to learning; most devoted their adult lives to scholarship, writing, and public service. They truly sought to reshape moral beings and promote a well-ordered society where each one fulfills his/her proper role.

In *SE*, after reliving the Jesus story, the retreatant has been recharged with a new spirituality for daily life: action beyond affective feelings of love (Haight 2012, p. 280). First, in realizing that God is in all things, one is invited to live and share a life compatible with that presence and collaborate with God's transforming intention for all, leading to a radical commitment to the world—nothing and no one should be excluded. All things become God's property, including Church and pastoral work, politics, diplomacy, and so forth (Rahner 1968, p. 22). Three components sum up the essentials of the Jesuit ministries: their ministries of the Formula, Exercises, and education programs (O'Malley 1993, p. 85). Among them, the early Jesuit ministry involved that of the Word, the sacrament, and works of mercy. Part of their identity was disclosed through the schools in which students were channeled, among others, toward the development of character, preparing for a life of service, and the change of culture at large (O'Malley 1993, p. 90).

Second, personal transformation comes from searching within oneself—"the turn to the depths" (Tetlow 1992, p. 9), either through seeking the true human nature in *li* or seeking the union between human beings and God. Both interior and exterior cultivation are integral parts of the whole person—*ren* and love have to be manifested through life-affirming practice in the world of mankind and affairs. Furthermore, we cannot underestimate the importance of education for the common good and the reinvigoration of a tradition in spiritual cultivation. Nevertheless, the Neo-Confucian self-cultivation is oriented toward returning to the origin of human nature in a relational scheme of *wanwuyiti*, while the Ignatian tradition envisions contemplation in action—evangelizing an ever-expanding world for the *Magis*.

Third, the focus of interior cultivation consists of dealing with the problem of desire. For the Neo-Confucians, desire is associated with selfish interest, that which is not real and universal in the world's true interest. By constantly nurturing and rectifying the mind

through learning, one will transform the mind and arrive at an equilibrium to make an impartial judgment. Ideally, one arrives at a state that is void of selfishness and filled with the *li* of Heaven and goodness (Taylor 1978, p. 87). The goal of *SE* is to discern the disordered affections that prevent one from acting with freedom and in conformity with the right reason and the will of God. The solution is to maintain indifference to created things that can be desired only insofar as they serve the end of humanity. The retreatant is urged to choose poverty and humiliation with Christ and to desire to follow Him. To sum up, whatever is against the *li* of Heaven or the will of God is to be abandoned, and one should arrive at a state of equilibrium in desiring worldly things.

Aside from the thematic overlap between the two spiritual traditions, there are complementary aspects that invite further reflection and interreligious learning. The religious imagination figuring prominently in *SE* inspires us to read the last chapter of *Reflections* anew, where Zhu Xi vividly recounted stories of sages and worthies, apparently believing that these would help educate the world. Consider the paradigmatic examples of Cheng Hao and Zhang Zai, whose biographical narratives are particularly impressive; the two were depicted as exceptionally virtuous in their pursuit of learning, their handling of human relationships, and their performance of various social roles. One may be induced to partake in their life stories and forge an intimate bond with them by following the Ignatian way of memory-making imagination in contemplation.¹⁴ Even the frequent appearance of Confucius and Zhu Xi in dreams has kept him in good faith to follow the Way, written by the Neo-Confucian Wu Yubi in his journal (Wu 2013).

Special attention can also be riveted to the sensory details that may have been disregarded previously. For example, one may see “objects” while reading the following passage: “When most people thought that a matter was extremely difficult, the Master (Cheng Yi) did it naturally as the irresistible flow of water. His conscientiousness and sincerity penetrated metal and stone, and his filial piety and brotherly respect influenced spiritual beings. As one looked at his countenance, one found that in dealing with people, he was as warm as the spring sun. As one listened to his words, one found that as they entered one’s ear, they were as enriching as timely rain”.

Sagehood may still be elusive, but constant imagining in the Ignatian fashion could direct us straight toward the path, bringing us closer to achieving the desideratum. Stephen Angle made similar suggestions, positing that direct modeling on sages may not be applicable, but we may learn from worthies—even our teachers and local notables (Angle 2009, p. 17). After reading *SE*, those narratives and sensory details scattered everywhere in *Reflections* were illuminated, as if by a new light, and so has our understanding of how to be a sage—through imaging embodied spirituality.

On the other hand, given that spiritual exercise is usually accomplished in a concentrated period, the Neo-Confucian attention to daily practice might be a natural complement to its Ignatian counterpart, i.e., attending closely to daily practices as reflected in our words, feelings, intentions, etiquette, and concrete behaviors, to foster what P.J. Ivanhoe specified as “the awareness, attentiveness, and care in and of every day” (Ivanhoe 2013, p. 72). Further, Neo-Confucian procedural morality, including its prescriptions and strategies that start with the daily renewal of things at hand to improve ourselves in our family, community, society, and, finally, the greater world, may be a pragmatic way toward the transformation of the self.

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Notes

- ¹ As Francis X. Clooney pointed out, “Despite their cultural creativity and determination to be open where possible, in the end, whatever they identify as ‘pagan’, they reject”. Quoted from (Cline 2018, pp. 21–22).
- ² Cline noted that most Christian theologians define spirituality in monotheistic terms. The Christian inclusivists and exclusivists are open to the possibility of sharing Exercises either because they consider conversion to Christianity necessary for salvation or not. For Haight, Exercises could be adapted for members of non-religious traditions. None of them discuss whether there should be mutual understanding and learning from the spiritual resources of other religious traditions.
- ³ This text brings together the views of five prominent Sung Confucian scholars. Zhu Xi was recognized as the main contributor. For *Reflections*, I used Wing-Tsit Chan’s English translation. Chan adopted the text of Chu Tzu i-shu, which is the printed edition of the Li family’s Pao-kao Hall. See (Zhu et al. 1967). See also (Zhu et al. 2011). For *SE*, I used the translation and commentary of W.H. Longridge, George E. Ganss, and Joseph A. Tetlow.
- ⁴ Paul Knitter distinguished four types of interreligious dialogue: the dialogue of theology, spirituality, action, and life. See (Cornille 2013, p. 134).
- ⁵ On the religious nature of Neo-Confucian pursuit of sagehood, see (De Bary 1975, p. 7); see also (Taylor 1978, pp. 101–11).
- ⁶ The term *li* (理) is exceptionally important, but ambiguous. It has been translated as “form”, “principle”, “order”, “reason”, “Logos”, and “pattern”. The appearance of “li” in early Confucian texts is sparse. It only became the central metaphysical category in Cheng Yi and Zhu Xi. See (Ziporyn 2008, pp. 401–22); see also (Zhang 1963, p. 44).
- ⁷ The term *wanwuyiti* (万物一体) literally means “ten thousand things forming one body”, which has been translated in various ways, e.g., “Ten Thousand Things-One Body”, “Forming One Body with the Universe”, “Unity of All Things”, “Unifying Interconnectedness”, “Theory of One Body”, and so forth.
- ⁸ See (Meng and Zhao n.d., vol. 13). See also Zhuang, Zi. “Discussion on Making All Things Equal”, in (Watson 2013). The Complete Works of Zhuangzi, p. 13.
- ⁹ *Ren* is translated as “humanity”, “benevolence”, “perfect virtue”, “goodness”, “human-heartedness”, “love”, “altruism”, and so forth. Wing-tsit Chan argues that none of them exhaust their meaning. “*Ren*” is used in Confucian texts in two different senses, both as a specific virtue and as a broader term signifying the attainment of all the interrelated virtues.
- ¹⁰ There were two types of quiet-sitting: one a general state of quiet reflection, and the other a contemplation aimed at the ground of one’s nature. See (Taylor 1978, pp. 77–78).
- ¹¹ The idea of sagehood has evolved since the classical period, it has been linked with skill, creativity, political authority, perception, and moral virtue. See (Angle 2009, pp. 14–17).
- ¹² Undoubtedly, Ignatius’s inspiration for *SE* came from his inherited tradition. The view of Christ as the Savior dominated the concept of imitating Christ from the early Church to the Middle Ages. *The Imitation of Christ* summarized and passed on to future generations much of the late medieval spiritual teachings on which Ignatius drew heavily. See (Constable 1995, pp. 147, 241).
- ¹³ The major literary sources of *SE* detected are the *Life of Christ* of Ludolph the Carthusian (1300–1378), the *Golden Legend* of Jacob of Voragine (1230–1298), the *Imitation of Christ* by Thomas à Kempis (1380–1471), a confessional manual, and a *Book of Hours*. See (O’Reilly 2021, p. 185).
- ¹⁴ In Ming scholar Wu Yubi’s spiritual journal, he asserted repeatedly that dreaming of Confucius and Zhu Xi consolidated his faith to follow the Way for life. Much more can be derived from employing the Ignatian technique of imagining in meditation.

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