

**BE THE DREAM  
AWAKEN TO COSMIC COMPASSION**

**IGNATIAN PEDAGOGY  
IN THE CONTEXT OF  
AN EVOLUTIONARY UNIVERSE**

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“Jesuit higher education institutions, theological facilities, business schools, research and capacity building centres are invited to engage students in transformative education and to explore new themes and areas of interdisciplinary research.”

Recommendation 79, *Healing a Broken World*

## **BE THE DREAM: AWAKEN TO COSMIC COMPASSION**

### **IGNATIAN PEDAGOGY IN THE CONTEXT OF AN EVOLUTIONARY UNIVERSE**

In October – December 2014 we began our first attempt at offering an integrated cosmic vision to the students at St Xavier’s College, Mumbai using the Ignatian Pedagogical Paradigm (IPP). This 30-hour interdisciplinary Honours course “Be the Dream: Awaken to Cosmic Compassion” was offered under the umbrella of the Department of Interreligious Studies (DIRS) in collaboration with the Xavier Institute of Social Research and Action (XISR). The 12 students, who opted for it, were from the age group of 18-22, a variety of academic majors, and an even wider range of faith traditions. Two other students were teachers, one being a vice-principal from Wilson college. Twenty hours were spent in the classroom with an off-site field visit over a three-day intensive. Far more than ten hours were spent in reflection, journaling and research. Journals that were submitted bi-weekly over a period of two months reflected the struggle of awakening to a wider reality and becoming conscious of their biases. Classroom discussion and journal writings questioned cultural values and ways of being, realization of self as co-creating the social injustices and ecological devastation surrounding them, integration of what was learned with other courses in academic silos, questioning of the current model of education that inadvertently fosters alienation and stress. This understanding and experience of being integral and interconnected served to facilitate a *metanoia* so that these students are now motivated to be persons for others.

### **CONTEXT:**

Students were introduced to their common Universe Story<sup>1</sup>, told from a deep systems science perspective. It speaks of our fundamental narrative in which our bodies and the bodies of all we see around us emerged from, are part of, and responsible for. Unlike the story of evolution/environment usually told in various academic silos through the lens of ‘scientism’<sup>2</sup>,

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<sup>1</sup> *The Universe Story* is both the name of a book by Brian Swimme (evolutionary cosmologist) and Thomas Berry (Passionist priest/geologist) and a term given by a global movement of people inspired by the wisdom inherent within our 13.8 billion year journey together.

<sup>2</sup> Scientism explains science in a way that measurable matter is the only reality and is essentially mechanical in its workings, at the foundations of existence, matter is without consciousness or subjectivity, nature has no purpose/evolution has no inherent meaning, consciousness unique to humans-a by-product of bio-chemistry and confined within the brain.

existence devoid of mystery, purpose, sentience and creativity, the deep systems approach<sup>3</sup> to science conveys the wonder and awe that overwhelms many scientists as they face the stupendous creative power animating our 13.8 billion year journey together.

The mysterious big history<sup>4</sup> of our lives was outlined through its 8 threshold moments (big bang, formation of galaxies, elements, solar system, life, humans, agricultural era, industrial era (and end of Cenozoic era from which we emerged) and now our emerging 9<sup>th</sup> moment – the ‘ecozoic era’. This is the era which we are responsible for co-creating together thus fostering the flourishing for all. The *Journey of the Universe*<sup>5</sup> film was ‘paused’ at the various threshold moments for experiential movement, integration, reflection and discussion. This type of meditative integration was crucial to balance the cognitive style now dominant in education. The cosmic journey was again conveyed dramatically through a closing ritual - The Cosmic Walk.

## **EXPERIENCE:**

The common response of each participant after listening to and meditating on their integral origin story was one of deep awe, wonder and reverence. The journal entries revealed that the students were now able to see their bodies and themselves and all around them as part of an integral co-creative process.

*“My view of the world has changed, I am able to relate many things and see how each and everything is interconnected.”* (Vedika)

*We took off with a meditation to relax our mind and activate our senses; it calmed me down.* (Apurva)

*“We are such an amazing and significant part of this universe, evolving together with all species and forces of nature. I am mother earth and mother earth is me. Knowing about this cosmos has been the first step towards unraveling the purpose of my life. Having understood this, I wonder, won’t it solve our issues of inequality for we are cutting down separation/discrimination from its basic root”* (Shweta)

*“What struck me the most was being told to ‘think beyond what we see.’ The Big Bang theory has never affected me the way it did today. We are all interrelated, we have emerged from the same stars. Thus my*

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<sup>3</sup> Deep systems proponents consider attributes to our story of a unified whole, immense background energy, continuous creation, consciousness at every scale (increasing in complexity), freedom at the foundations.

<sup>4</sup> Big History is the name of a book written by David Christian as a framework for all knowledge, and an emerging system of pedagogy ([www.bighistoryproject.com](http://www.bighistoryproject.com)) It is also a movement of an emerging international association of big history professionals ([www.ibha.org](http://www.ibha.org)). Dominican University in California has now made it mandatory that each college freshman take a course in Big History. ([www.dominican.edu](http://www.dominican.edu))

<sup>5</sup> *Journey of the Universe film* ([www.journeyoftheuniverse.org](http://www.journeyoftheuniverse.org)) developed by Brian Swimme and Mary Evelyn Tucker. (Yale Forum on Religion and Ecology, [www.fore.research.yale.edu](http://www.fore.research.yale.edu)) Each were inspired by Thomas Berry, CP and Pierre Teilhard de Chardin, SJ placing the wisdoms of religion, tribals, and women in conversation with our 13.8 BY autopoietic journey. In addition to our integral journey, the film also shows the co-evolution of culture and consciousness- a transformed identity, compelling purpose, deep meaning and feeling, natural ethics and sustainable living.

*view has changed dramatically when it comes to looking at the problems of the world. The meditation did help us to delve deeper. I did notice that I should listen to myself and nature even more. (Renisha)*

*"At no point was there any disruption or distraction in the learning and comprehension process - the cosmic integrating exercises genuinely helped". (Arpit)*

This profound awareness gave them a reverent lens to view life and initiated a significant shift from mere information to holistic transformation. The importance of adopting other teaching practices honouring somatic and narrative ways of knowing in school classrooms for capturing truth and stimulating the imagination were also conveyed in journals and evaluations. In other words, IPP grounded in the context of an evolutionary universe, evoked wonder, reverence and awe, renewing the vestigial integral sense and awakening cosmic compassion.

### **REFLECTION on FIELD VISIT:**

The first day of the course began with a field trip coordinated by Anthony Dias, SJ and the team of XISR. The site visited was the Reay Road slum where a group of Pardhi 'denotified' tribes who had been displaced from their lands of origin because of 'development' are located. Also living at the site was a group of hijras, who because of social stigma had left their own communities of origin but seemed to find compassionate support from the Pardhi community. The discussions following the exposure (but before learning the Universe Story) reflected the unconsciousness of their bias, the lack of integral understanding and that this lack of integral understanding affected 'the whole texture' of their civilization. Students exhibited interest and compassion with comments resentful of the 'government' not supporting the tribes, and realizing they had inherited lots of prejudices about the group (thieves, lazy, addicts, genderism etc) from their families/community. Student awareness of displacement issues or how their own habits of consumption resulted in hardship for others and the land were not evident. They were shocked by the garbage dumped in front of the slum and were made aware of how the Pardhis are looked upon as the garbage of a developed society.

However, following the two days devoted to addressing unexamined assumptions, dualist mindsets/cultural goals and introducing other ways of knowing outlined in religions, tribal cosmology and the Universe Story, students were able to challenge culture in another way and were able to see the connections between spiritual alienation, social injustices and environmental unsustainability:

*"The integration was very important I think....helped me to join the dots much better...joining these dots, seeing how (I hate to say this) but (and admit to say this) that we are really the pawns in the hands of the very rich." (Kala)*

*The intensive helped me become more aware of my physical self and helped me connect with my inner self. The whole cycle and relationships between social justice, cosmic compassion and being in touch with our selves makes sense now. “ (Vedika)*

Students also began to play with reinterpreting traditional ‘religious’ concepts:

*“How amazing...I mean think of it, my hair could have been feathers of a bird once upon a time, or the conservative ‘Hindus’ who refrain from cow meat- might be eating remains of a cow through the nutrients of their vegetarian food...LOL...So ironic....But this brings me to my new theory ‘rebirth’ so rebirth or born in the form of other species and living organisms is just the remains of one’s dead body taking the form of another organism through the decaying and nutrition processes of biology. So in a way have begun to believe in this kind of rebirth’ (Aditi)*

They were able to identify their habits of consumption stemming from a spiritual void and the cultural pressure through media promoting them to engage in consumptive behaviours.

*‘The immediate change on the surface level to become sustainable: reduce use of plastics, eliminate shopping cravings, make homemade food and beauty products, a deep acknowledgement and compassion for my skin, my organs, my body that has been supporting me...maybe ever since 13.8 billion years. (Kala)*

Comparing the value of deep systems theory with that of a dualist approach to ‘environment’ Arpit wrote *‘Systems theory offers a perspective on the three interrelated issues (spirituality, ecology and social justice) that examines the core of the issue - i.e the very deep connection between living beings, their geographical surroundings and the rest of the non-Earth universe. It also centers itself within history, it is dynamic, unlike the ‘environmental’ perspective.’*

Shweta learned a new term to describe her task: *I have the role of a ‘mid-wife’ to return what I have taken from Mother Earth, to bring back the trees, water so that all generations can cherish her once again.*

## **ACTION:**

Because the face to face interaction with students was concentrated over a three-day period and not extended weekly throughout the semester, it was difficult to trace the awakening process and various actions taken by students regarding change of their lifestyles and mindsets in a quantifiable way. However the shifts of alienation, awakening and connection were evident in their journals, the pre and post course questionnaires and the mid and post course evaluations. The quality of the final projects was indicative of this metanoia. Their new integral lens allowed them to weave together issues that previously seemed disconnected.

The students were caught up by ‘blessed unrest’ - *“and at the moments like these I also realize that I cannot continue my speech of ‘them’ and ‘us’ because we really are one, and we need to fight not only for the marginalized but also for Mother Earth. If I sit cross legged and decide that there is nothing I can do*

*for Mother Earth, whose metals, atoms, chemicals are that which sustain and have made me, isn't it rather a bit selfish and foolish to be doing? (Kala)*

During the semester students were motivated to attend various college activities related to what they had learned - a trip to the annual Jesuit national tribal festival in Gujarat where the struggle to preserve the integral vision of tribal communities became evident. Others attended the *Romero* film and the play *A Peasant from El Salvador*. They were able to link the spiritual, social and environmental issues raised by the events in El Salvador years ago with what is occurring today in India. Some attended an Integral Leadership presentation at Wilson College (the programme itself was the project of a student!) and the AICUF members of the class supported this same Integral Leadership presentation at Xavier's. Students questioned the anthropocentric focus of a panel presentation on '*Vasudhaiva Kutumbakum*' ie The Whole World is a Family — which excluded the cosmic context.

The subject matter of the final presentations was determined by the students based on their interests and inspiration. Four students joined to develop a multipronged programme of intervention to empower the Pardhi tribe at Reay Road. The rest were individual projects - ranging from deep ecology in conversation with the Upanishads to 'the big history of cashmere coats' (tracing the origin of the goat, the bioregion, the coat making and trade history, the changes with industrial farming practices, goat rearing, climate change etc). Current issues like farmer suicides and its links with chemical farming and Monsanto, the mysterious leap from unicellular to multi-cellular organisms and our digestive systems as well as photo evidence of different attitudes to ecology between northern nomadic tribes and local Mumbai IT students indicate the breadth and depth to which the students plunged.

## **EVALUATION:**

In the recent *Promotio Iustitiae*<sup>6</sup> Special Report on Ecology "*Healing a Broken World*" (HBW) the Social Justice and Ecology Secretariat outlined clearly the links between social justice and environmental degradation. The document reminds those in Jesuit institutions of the call of GC 35 for reconciliation and : 'to establish right relationships with God, neighbor, and creation, opening for us opportunities to delve deeper in our faith and challenging us to find ways of healing our broken world...We need a deep change of heart. This is the only radical way to face the present ecological challenge. We must therefore renew the sources of our Ignatian spirituality, a spirituality that invites us to acknowledge, give thanks and commit ourselves to the life present in creation. In that renovation we will find ourselves affectively linked with other religious traditions, which also contain very valuable spiritual experiences for the defense of creation" (HBW pg 42)

*Healing a Broken World* is written from the perspective of the 'stewardship model' of environmental and social justice. While this model is a good way to call for and suggest

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<sup>6</sup>Downloaded 12 December 2012 [www.sjweb.info](http://www.sjweb.info)

necessary actions, its language and style is ‘homiletic’<sup>7</sup> It is not radical enough to change hearts, the *metanoia* necessary to practice life differently. The focus is on right action, but prophetic language to foster an understanding for sustained right practice is unheard. For sustained care of creation a *metanoia* involves a change in self identity based on readings of our fundamental text, the Cosmos. Ignatius also returned to our fundamental context as can be seen in the *Contemplatio*, the climactic contemplation of the Spiritual Exercises

Our integral existence with God, neighbor and the Mystery in all things is the *metanoia* necessary. We currently struggle with a mindset that is not integral, namely Cartesian dualism. The insufficiency of the dominant current dualist interpretations of Ignatian spirituality and the practice of its pedagogy, the Ignatian Pedagogical Paradigm (IPP) are best summed up by Bernard Lonergan, SJ: “How indeed, is a mind to become conscious of its own bias when that bias springs from a communal flight from understanding and is supported by the whole texture of a civilization? (Lonergan, 1958, xv)

Although a course on ‘environment’ is now part of the Jesuit curriculum many students have not been affected by it, are reluctant to take it seriously because ‘they are not working in the environment’ (interpreted as a professional field), nor have many been able to effectively link the topic to social justice or religion/spirituality. These are the effects of dualism and our communal flight from integral understanding and action. (see feedback at the end)

Homiletic language does nothing to foster an awakening and healing of the dualist mindset bias which is causing the problems in the first place - paradoxically the absence of prophetic language complicates the intertwined issues of ecology, social justice and spirituality by keeping them in separate academic silos and professional action. As ecotheologian Diarmuid O’Murchu rightly points out: “reconnecting with the Earth –with the whole Earth- is the single greatest challenge now facing us as a human species”.

Keeping this in mind our humble attempt to design and implement a course to renew the Ignatian Pedagogical Paradigm seems well worth the effort. We responded to the call of HBW to transform our students through the theme of integration, even transcending the ‘interdisciplinary’ since all disciplines have emerged from our common 13.8 billion year journey together. The narratives of the students reveal the effectiveness of IPP in the context of an evolutionary universe to awaken cosmic compassion and be the change - effectively complying with HBW and the foundations of Ignatian spirituality. Our primary context of the Cosmos is the basis of any ‘religious’ story and is the commons we all emerged from. This is a renewed understanding of Vasudhaiva Kutumbakum and has huge potential for discussions that are sometimes moribund regarding peace and justice within interreligious dialogues. From our common heritage and

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<sup>7</sup>Homiletic language is appropriate for a community who share a common faith.’ Currently we suffer from a ‘disparity of cult’ not, between various religions but internally within each religion- those who have a faith in the ‘integrity of Creation’ and those who operate from a sense of being cut off and separate from.

common ground, a common reverence and responsible action can emerge globally through our Jesuit networks and compliant with the Earth Charter.<sup>8</sup> This renewed spirituality, based on Cosmogogenesis, our evolutionary universe, becomes then, the renewed contextual basis of the Ignatian Pedagogical Paradigm. In doing so, the IPP becomes '*radical*<sup>9</sup> in nature, *characterized by departure from tradition; progressive, unorthodox*'. Paradoxically, it is through our departure from tradition as currently understood and practiced that we become more orthodox, finding God in all things, a faith in the integrity of Creation, being of and for others - Cosmic Compassion.

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### **FEEDBACK: Contrast Between Environment Course and BTJ Honours Course**

Quite a few students shared the marked contrast between the BTJ Honours course and the Special Course on Environment. One of them articulates their sentiments in her feedback below.

*The environment course that I took for a whole semester, it seemed detached from me. Every lecture I would think, we are talking about the same things, the Narmada bachao, the Delhi pollution, Mumbai garbage but there was no connect. Internally as a person I took it in like Science....It never sensitized me. I felt nothing. Nobody wanted to learn environment like any other subject. Rather than cramming the book we would have liked field trips, or a deeper connect to the environment.*

*The 'Be the Dream' Honours course was far different. No books (not compulsory, at least) and it shared a bigger story a bigger history with me. The environment course tells me to protect the environment to stop the depletion of resources, else it will affect our health and we cannot survive. This is still selfish in a way ( the underlying words for me sound like, let's leave it now and rape nature later, after it revives itself). The 'Be the Dream' course is more selfless. It tells people that we have all evolved from the same cosmic radiation of the big bang. So what is in me is there in every entity of the universe. We are one integrated body. Hurting the environment is like snipping one's toes off and saying my hands are not going to hurt or be affected. But it does hurt....the entire body mourns in the pain. It established a sense of equality where all beings of the cosmos are the same as me. So I cannot choose their fate, by harming them.*

*My classmates never regularly attended the SPC course before either. A night before the exam people went about asking for Photocopies, name of the book to study etc. So the purpose seemed defeated.*

*I am aware that all my SPC teachers had designed their course with the best interest, however the students never did pay heed to that. Be the Dream is one such course that could change a capitalist like me into thinking about inclusive development without harming the nature. I do hope my juniors benefit from the course.*

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<sup>8</sup> The Earth Charter ([www.earthcharterinaction.org](http://www.earthcharterinaction.org)) is a soft law document often used by UN agencies outlining ethical principles to foster sustainable development.

<sup>9</sup> *Radical* defined in *Shorter Oxford Dictionary, 2002*. Compiled by W. Trumble and L. Brown. New York: Oxford University Press. The departure and unorthodoxy is not in the heretic sense, but from the way tradition is currently understood, which in many cases is heretical- not acknowledging right relationships with God and Cosmos-as per our Cartesian cosmology.