

Ignacio de Loyola

Review Number:

1567

Publish date:

Thursday, 27 March, 2014

Author:

Enrique García Hernán

ISBN:

9788430602117

Date of Publication:

2013

Price:

£20.00

Pages:

584pp.

Publisher:

Taurus

Publisher url:

<http://www.editorialtaurus.com/es/libro/ignacio-de-loyola/>

Place of Publication:

Madrid

Reviewer:

Megan Armstrong

The continuing importance of Ignatian spirituality and the Society of Jesus is hard to deny these days especially in the wake of the recent election of the first Jesuit as pope. It certainly helps to explain the flurry of biographies on the founder of the order in the last two decades alone. But as the recent contribution by Enrique García Hernán makes clear, Ignatius Loyola deserves another look. Indeed, biographers have long grappled with the complexity of a reformer who seemed equally at ease in the roles of spiritual advisor, author, administrator and diplomat. Loyola suffered from ill health for most of his life, and yet traveled extensively, developing large networks of friends, colleagues and patrons in the process. How to situate this important thinker in the intellectual and spiritual climate of the day is particularly difficult given his wide-ranging interests. His writings bear witness to the influence of humanism and mysticism, scholastic theology, and even the Iberian movement, *alumbradismo*.

Ignacio de Loyola is the most recent biography to come out of the book series *Españoles Eminentes*. Produced by Taurus Publishing, the intent of this series is to introduce well-researched biographies of important Spanish individuals to a broad audience. Hernán is a formidable scholar in his own right, a highly regarded expert on Early Modern Spain. He is, therefore, a worthy choice as author for a subject as important as Loyola. Given the more popular focus of the series, Hernán also shows that he can write an engaging and informative book that could appeal beyond the walls of academia.

Hernán is not exploring Ignatian spirituality *per se*, but rather Loyola's success as the founder of one of the most influential missionary traditions in the history of the Catholic Church. As he points out quite rightly,

until recently the function of most biographies of Loyola was essentially hagiographic. Their intent was to represent a perfected image of the reformer, one worthy of sainthood. His life was intended to provide a model of spiritual heroism that was carefully constructed for public consumption and imitation. The earliest biographies date back to the lifetime of Loyola, and it is worth noting that his immediate group of followers produced a prodigious number. This may reflect, as Hernán suggests, the personal appeal of the great reformer. Much like Francis of Assisi, the founder of another influential missionary tradition, Loyola seems to have been a remarkably compelling individual who captivated the imagination of his followers.

The close, personal relationship between Loyola and his earliest followers forms one of the important thematic threads in Hernán's monograph. It also explains why Hernán turns frequently to the early biographies to understand Loyola the man. Four in particular are important to his analysis: Those of Diego Lainez (1547), Juan de Polanco (1551), Jeronimo Nadal (1555), and Pedro de Ribadeneira (1572). They require contextualization, however. Hernán points out, for example, that the earliest biographies do not mention Loyola's association with a number of well-known *alumbrados*, and for good reason: this religious movement was eventually denounced as a heresy by Spanish authorities. And indeed, Loyola would come under suspicion with the Spanish inquisition because of his reputed connections to some of its adherents. And yet, Hernán argues that the early Jesuit biographies are useful for his purposes because they present distinctive visions of the founder of their order. Here we find Loyola as the passionate reformer and soldier, pilgrim and student, loyal vassal and religious founder.

A fundamental question underlies Hernán's investigation: What accounts for Loyola's success in founding a new religious order? Over the course of several chapters, Hernán argues that Loyola capitalized on certain skills and qualities that were valued in Early Modern Europe. He was remarkably adept above all at working within the complicated political and religious realities of the post-Reformation era.

Each chapter responds to Hernán's interest in examining Loyola *in situ* – that is, in the context of his own culture. The first part looks at the early years of Loyola's life. Hernán notes that we know very little about his early years, and so his task from the start is to recreate the world into which Loyola was born. He was the youngest child belonging to a noble family that recognized the duke of Najera as an important patron. Loyola was trained in arms as well as letters as one would expect at this time of a member of the nobility. The hope of course was that he would pursue a military and/or administrative career in the court of a powerful prince such as the Duke. Even as a child, however, Loyola would find his world changing in dramatic ways that would shape his later interest in a career as a missionary and religious leader. By 1492, a year after his birth, Spain was en route to becoming the heart of an empire that would eventually stretch from the Atlantic world to the Mediterranean Sea. Travel accounts described Spanish encounters with new cultures. Meanwhile, Europe was overwhelmed with reformist impulses both within the Western Church, and by 1521, without.

It was during these formative years that Loyola seems to have first become familiar with the *alumbrados*. A later chapter probes more deeply the impact of this movement upon Loyola's development as a reformer. For Hernán, however, Loyola's early encounter with the controversial movement is still significant. It shows he was thinking deeply about his faith long before he was injured in battle in 1521 at the battle of Pamplona, an event that is often given credit for sending him more firmly on the path of a religious reformer. Hernán downplays, in other words, the traditional narrative of Loyola's 'conversion' from soldier to reformer. Rather we find a man who had been thinking deeply about his faith from an early age.

Part two covers Loyola's years as a soldier, a career facilitated by the patronage of the Duke of Najera. Indeed, the Duke would be an important patron of Loyola from this time forward. Hernán spends little time on Loyola's experience in battle, but instead follows his development as a skilled administrator and military leader. By all accounts Loyola was an effective leader until he was sidelined by injury in 1521. He developed as well a reputation as a good negotiator as well, a skill that would see him recruited for work as a political envoy on behalf of the Spanish monarchy. These skills and the growing patronage network of Loyola during these years would prove useful later on, when Loyola made the decision to pursue an altogether different career path.

The remaining seven parts of the biography trace Loyola's life as a religious reformer. Part three investigates more closely his interest in *alumbradismo*, and parts four and five explore his pursuit of a theological vocation first at the Universities of Alcalá, Valladolid and Salamanca in Spain, and then in Paris. While it was in Paris in 1534 that Loyola formally gave birth to his society in 1534, Hernán shows that Loyola had already begun forming a group of 'companions' while at University in Spain. Indeed, a number of his associates from these days would remain close friends and some would join the Society in Paris. The final four parts look at his years as the leader of a new religious order: his efforts in Rome to gain papal and curial support, the formulation of its distinctive administrative structure, and the political hurdles faced by Loyola and the society during its first years of existence.

As one would expect, Hernán's narrative of Loyola's years as a reformer covers familiar ground. We learn about his investigation by the Spanish inquisition, the oath taken by the brotherhood in Paris, his frustrated efforts to go on a pilgrimage to Jerusalem, and the writing of the *Spiritual Exercises*. For the most part, however, Hernán uses these moments to illuminate Loyola's remarkable skills as a mediator. Establishing a new religious order was no easy task, especially in the era of the Reformation. Church leaders were sensitive to any indications of unorthodoxy and this included any questioning of church authority. Loyola succeeded where others failed, however, because he understood the social nature of power. While he clearly considers Loyola an innovative administrator and religious thinker, Hernán suggests that his success also owed a great deal to his ability to forge 'a middle way'. This was a skill honed through his earlier experiences as a soldier and political envoy, before the courts of the Inquisition, at University, and in the corridors of curial authority in Rome. And it would prove critical as well during Loyola's direction of the fledgling order in the first decades after its foundation.

Hernán's biography proves that Loyola is one of those historic figures that bears repeated examination. Here a broader cultural and political framework provides a rather different perspective on Loyola the man, one that underscores his political savvy and charisma as well as his determination. Loyola attracted admirers and close friends with relative ease, a quality which may well help explain why he was able to create a new order that from its start was international both in orientation as well as membership. As a study of the relationship between political networks and religious reform, Hernán's biography fits in well with the recent work of Barbara Diefendorf and Jodi Bilinkoff among others. As a complex study of the origins of the Jesuit tradition and the leadership of Loyola, *Ignacio de Loyola* aligns comfortably with John O'Malley's *The First Jesuits*. But it is also an examination of Early Modern Spain. Hernán vividly shows the Iberian footing of the entire Jesuit enterprise, beginning with Loyola himself. His political and religious formation was largely the product of Iberian culture, and it was through Spanish patronage networks that Loyola received the political and financial support he needed to found his new order. Wherever he traveled – Paris, Rome, Venice – he operated within a web of personal relations that were decidedly Iberian in origins and nature. And his earliest followers were, with few exceptions, from Spain. This Iberian facet of Hernán's biography is no less intriguing, as much for what it tells us about the operations of Spanish networks outside of the Iberian peninsula, as its role in the construction of the Jesuit tradition itself.

Source URL: <http://www.history.ac.uk/reviews/review/1567>

Links

[1] <http://www.history.ac.uk/reviews/item/61189>