

Poverty

I feel very close to the church at Philippi these days.

Every advantage that I had gained I considered lost for Christ's sake. Yes, and I look upon everything as loss compared with the overwhelming gain of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord. For his sake I did in actual fact suffer the loss of everything, but I considered it useless rubbish compared with being able to win Christ. For now my place is in him, and I am not dependent upon any of the self-achieved righteousness of the Law. God has given me that genuine righteousness which comes from faith in Christ. How changed are my ambitions! Now I long to know Christ and the power shown by his resurrection: now I long to share his sufferings, even to die as he died [*Is that the death urge transfigured? It doesn't say here.*], so that I may perhaps attain, as he did, the resurrection from the dead. Yet, I do not consider myself to have arrived spiritually, nor do I consider myself already perfect. But I keep going on, grasping ever more firmly that purpose for which Christ grasped me. I do not consider myself to have fully grasped it even now. But I do concentrate on this: I leave the past behind and with hands outstretched to whatever lies ahead, I go straight for the goal, my reward, the honor of being called by God in Christ. (Philippians 3:7-14. J.B.P. translation)

We are going to talk about poverty. I wish St. John of the Cross were here and we could turn a button and he would be a 20th century man. We would listen to him gladly. Or I would be even more than willing to hear St. Teresa. What a woman!

We turn a corner today. We move from what we've called the *solitaries* to what we call the *corporates*. But I am aware when you move from one to the other you're going around a corner somehow.

That is a prophecy. As far as I'm concerned, all we're doing this summer is preparing for next summer. The imperative upon the People of God is to build the picture of the new society that is even now being born. Putting our own house, the church, in order is but the necessary means to get that done.

I want you to think of the interior box in this illustration as the *new social vehicle*, and the outside one as the *new religious mode*, though where there is no religious mode, there is no social vehicle, and where there is no social vehicle, there is no religious mode. The two interpenetrate one another.

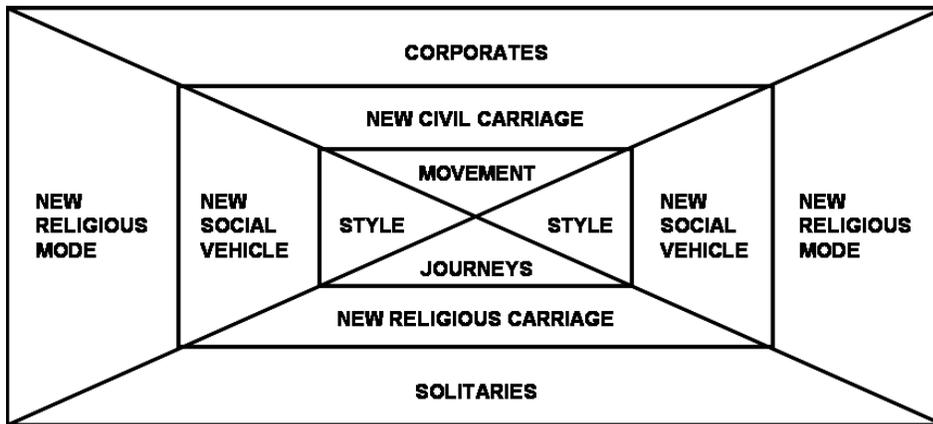


Figure 2 – 3: *The New Civil Carriage and the New Religious Carriage*

What we call the “solitaries” are at the bottom of the chart in the *new religious mode* square, and what we call the “corporates” are at the top of the new religious mode square. Within our model the social aspect of this is always at the top, and the individual aspect of this is at the bottom, so that the top of the new religious mode square has to do with corporate individuality, and the bottom has to do with solitary individuality. Therefore, both of these have to do with what Kierkegaard calls “the solitary individual.” I want to come back to that.

In the interior square you are dealing with the new social vehicle (and I prefer that it be sitting in the midst of the new religious mode, rather than the other way around). This is the new civil carriage and the new religious carriage. The new civil carriage has to do with the sociological reformulation of civil society, and the new religious carriage has to do with sociological reformulation of the religious community. We are well on our way, I suspect, in creating the new religious carriage, although the end nobody will ever see. Both of these have to do with society. There never was a new civil carriage until the religious mode was formed, and we’d better hearken well to that.

The second thing that we have to do before we can start is to go back once again to the diagram of the new religious mode charts.

Actually it’s a tic-tac-toe with the ends filled in, isn’t it? Here are prayer, meditation, and contemplation; here transparent knowing, transparent doing, and transparent being; here chastity, obedience, and here we are today, poverty.

A poetic way of talking about the self, the individual, is the consciousness of consciousness, or perhaps the consciousness of consciousness of consciousness. The last category would be equivalent to Kierkegaard’s definition of the self as the relationship that relates itself to itself. And when that relationship becomes the relationship that relates itself to itself, it grounds itself transparently in the power that constitutes it. That is what I mean by a third consciousness. Anyway, consciousness of consciousness, for me, is knowing, and it’s acting or doing, and it’s presence or being. That is what I mean by consciousness of consciousness.

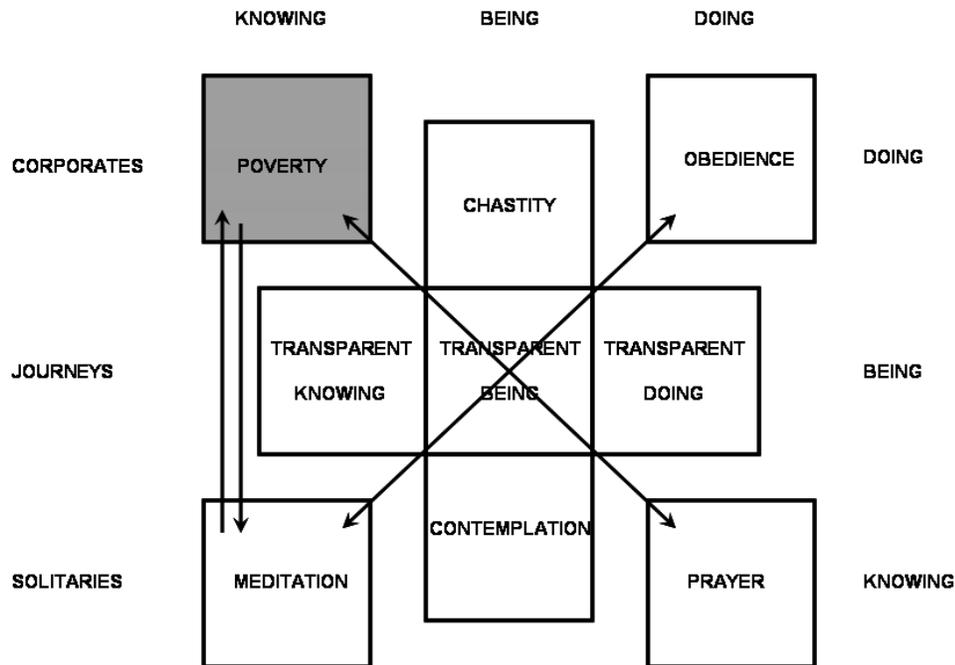


Figure 2 – 4: The New Religious Mode Dynamics

That gives you the most abstract category in grounding the religious mode in humanness itself. This is the way in which you check yourself every moment to be sure that this is in the context of the secular worldview, and not sneaking in the back or side door. All this has to talk about humanness as you and I experience humanness.

In talking about meditation the other day, I left out a sizable hunk of what I was going to say. You probably noticed when I jumped pretty quickly through the section on the conscience. Let me say this much. The way you can spot a person of faith – a clue – is whether you dare to live out of your own interior resources. Or you keep your own conscience. Nobody keeps it for you. But, you see, we’ve got a secret that the naïve person hearing that doesn’t know anything about. That person is not an individual here. It is a collective we. It is as if Luther, Amos, Jeremiah, and I keep my conscience.

What a fellowship! The external activity of the divine happens and questions my life, and I have to run to the council and to discuss it. After we discuss it, I have to make a decision. It must be a loyal one, although it may very well be in loyal opposition to Mr. Luther, if you please. But it’s *we* who keep that conscience. It’s not *I* who lives out of my own interior resources. It’s *we*, through the gracious activity of God, which peoples my being with the great spirit characters of the world.

Out of that meditation comes the possibility for radical poverty. I don’t know how to get this said with adequate poetry. The one thing that council demands is action. They are not even going to sit at the table with you if you’re piddling around with some intellectual, theoretical problem. Poverty issues out of meditation that is required before meditation is possible.

So, let’s talk about poverty. The basic category I’m going to use is the word “detachment.” I don’t like the word “disengagement.” I like detachment. Poverty is detachment, and obedience is engagement. Anybody who is engaged without detachment is pseudo-engaged, not engaged authentically. Unless you are detached from this world and the concerns of this world, you cannot stuff your total being into any given spot within this world. And *vice versa*. This detachment is not a withdrawal *from* the world. It is a withdrawal *in* the world. Any kind of withdrawal which is not intimately related to engagement, or is not for the one purpose of fanatical engagement within the world, is not what I mean by detachment. Detachment and engagement are interdependent as poverty and obedience are interdependent.

When I use the verbal sign “poverty,” I mean to be talking about a human state of being that every human being does know or can know about. I can also use the word poverty as something like a religious exercise, but I’m not talking about that right now.

I mean by poverty radical detachment, which is an inward posture related to an external sign. When you are dealing with the state of the solitaries, you are talking about something more passive. The state of the corporates is more active. The state of the solitaries is more subjective. I don’t mean that the way some of you will hear it. Both of these states of being are the most objective things in the world. To help you, the state of the corporates is more objective in the sense of being perceivable from without, or having signs that are perceivable from without. The key difference between these, minus one thing, is that the corporates as states of being have to do with postures toward the world or society. The solitaries have to do with relations to the mystery. I use the stylistic category “posture” intentionally. The solitaries are more the givens; the corporates are more the intendeds. You cannot actually divide any of these from one another. There is an intermixture at every point.

I want to put up the basic categories by which I intend to talk about the state of being that I call poverty. First of all, poverty is intentional detachment. That is what I have been trying to point to here to get started. Secondly, poverty is conquered contingency, but I don’t like that term. Thirdly, poverty is fantastic benevolence, fantastic in the sense of “unrestrained imagination.” In the 17th and 18th centuries, “benevolence” was a tremendous word. It has been out of favor now for a good fifty years. It was there in the Victorian age. I want to recover it again. In one translation of Luke, “peace on earth and goodwill to men” reads “and benevolence to men.” And finally, by poverty I mean sacramental portent. I’d like to use the word “sign,” but I want a rough and mighty word for the fourth category.

Recollect what I said a moment ago, that by poverty I mean an inward posture (intentional detachment) and an outward sign (sacramental portent). The middle two categories put the content into that. I’m going to use some ancient words here. Conquered contingency is humility, divine humility, if you like, and the other is benevolence, or love, if you please.

You are not going to get on top of this if you are not keenly aware that the great monastic movements in history were not leaving the world. They were missional in their intent. They saw society going one way to its destruction and they decided it had to go another way. They threw their lives into the breach of history to create a style of life that would bend the course of history. They were missional. I would like to rehearse for you the Dominicans, the Benedictines, and the Jesuits in terms of their fantastic secular causes that brought them into being.

It was in the midst of this that the great classical language of the orders came into being. It was there that their vows were formed, the vow of poverty, the vow of chastity, and the vow of obedience. Each one of these was pointing to a stumbling block that would keep the mission from succeeding. This was not some kind of an ascetic superimposition upon life.

If you are not well aware of the fact that the economic aspect of existence is one of the most gigantic stumbling blocks to corporate mission, then you haven’t even lived in the 20th century, let alone the 8th.

Second, obedience. Every two-bit character who hasn’t decided to be human wants to do his own little thing. He wants to become bishop, he wants, he wants, he wants. “Nobody is going to tell me what to do!” Unless that problem is solved, there is no corporate mission.

Third, chastity. Do not think for a moment that this is to be understood primarily in terms of the psychology of the Greeks. This again is missional. Those of you who haven’t been married very long have to see that the family always gets in the way of corporateness. Not sometimes. It always gets in the way! I need not rehearse in sentimental language about the woman or man who has to have so much attention from the spouse. “The mission doesn’t matter. Look at me. Here I am.” As a matter of fact, we’ve written tons of psychology books to support that kind of wretched un-selfhood. Shall I mention the children? Chastity was dealing fundamentally with the problem of the family as it related to God’s purpose in history. What a solution they had to it! Oh, they didn’t get rid of all the problems, did they? You have a family with you even if you don’t have a family. In the 20th century the answer to celibacy is the missional family. That is the new celibacy. That is the meaning of chastity whereby one thing can be willed.

The people we are talking about are always the fanatics in history. They are always the odd ones. They are often seen as the psychotics, even, because as everybody knows, to be normal is to be just what the *generalized other* always tells you.

These people are the perpetual revolutionaries in history. And by these people I've gone way beyond the religious orders. Any revolutionary, secular or otherwise, always – not sometimes – always lives by these three vows: obedience, chastity, and poverty. Are you clear about that? Shall I pull out the little red book of Mao and read his discipline? If you didn't know he wrote it, you could have thought that Thomas Aquinas wrote it. Shall we pull out the rules of some of the other revolutionaries – Che, for instance – and look at them in terms of poverty, chastity, and obedience?

But I haven't hit the bottom yet. A revolutionary who is authentic is a presentation of a style which is a manifestation of humanness at the radical bottom. Therefore, you and I have to grasp that if one does not participate in poverty, he or she is not participating in authentic humanness. The same statement is true of chastity, and the same statement is true of obedience.

Intentional Detachment

Now, let's get to the four categories that point to poverty. I say that detachment is foundationally human. Adler, the renegade Freudian, based his whole psychology upon one image: everyone has a hole in his/her center. In the center of a person's spirit or being there is a hole, a bottomless hole. A person spends his whole life pouring sand into that hole to fill it up. The basic propensity of a person is for status or power, according to Adler, but he or she cannot get enough of it. I mean, it is bottomless. That's what I mean when I say that a person *is* detachment, detachment from things of this world.

Because that hole is in the center and cannot be filled up, everyone is consumed with dread. Those of you who know Søren Kierkegaard's *Concept of Dread* will remember that he works this out. Because of who one is – that is, because one is contingency – he or she experiences dread. This dread is turned into the drive after security by attempting to grasp security by taking things of this world and bestowing upon them the power to fulfill the meaning of one's life.

Do I need to say that over again? Out of this dread comes the drive for security, which means that we attach ourselves to things of this world – our nation, mama, children, fortune, and right down the list, naming all of the gods. In doing that, one surrenders the detachment that finally defines one's being. You find yourself along with the mass of humanity seeking after one hunk of security and then another hunk of security, knowing and not knowing that security can never be realized. So in the midst of fallenness, one still experiences one's detachment, though it is a fallen detachment.

Poverty is this kind of intentional detachment. I've brought in the word "intentional." What I mean by the word "detachment" is a return to the pristine detachment that defines what it means to be a human being. This is what consciousness means. The return to detachment is the decision, the intention to be what one actually is. This means it is an experience in the twilight of the gods, or the death of the gods. It is breaking the bondage that one is in, when for security's sake one is related to one of the goods of this world.

All of that is another way of talking about radical monotheism. The person who is detached lives exposed before God. Just exposed. One's basic loyalty is there, the basic obedience is there. Remember the section on "Freedom" from Bonhoeffer's *Ethics*. What he is saying is this: the person of faith is utterly obedient, obedient to God; and God has only one rule for mankind: *be free*. God says, "That is what I made you. *Be* what I made you." That is practical, radical monotheism, that in every situation you live before the final reality.

One last word here has to do with my friend Gautama, the Buddha. I tell you, I love that man. You remember how in his understanding of life a human being had to overcome all desires. Overcoming desires is detachment. He was very clear about one thing, that if all of a sudden you could overcome all of the innate propensities, you would go to Nirvana immediately.

But I want to speak back to dear Gautama. It's not overcoming these desires that's the problem. The problem is dealing with the dread at the fundamental core of being that is always turning itself into a drive after security. That is the problem.

Manifest Contingency

The second category of poverty is manifest contingency. The one who is detached is aware of her contingency in a highly lucid fashion, understands her frailty, is aware that she was born naked and she is going to die naked. I don't mean just intellectually aware. I mean she is aware with her whole being.

The awareness of contingency here is simply absurd. Did you ever notice how absurd a dead person is? It is even more absurd when you are able to picture yourself as that cadaver. I mean it is repulsive! But the one who has experienced detachment pre-remembers death – as one remembers or recollects the past. Before you at all times is the horrifying experience of your own death. That is what I mean by manifest contingency. We manifest in detachment our contingency. Other people are in the midst of always fleeing from that scene I just described – the fatefulness of their own death. But the one who is detached, on the other hand, is always living before it as a true reminder.

When you talk about the cruciform principle, some people say, “You don't really mean really dying, do you?” I tell you, I go all to pieces inside when I hear that. How stupid can you get? Barth said, “I'm talking about a six-foot hole in the ground.” I mean this is utterly literal. One lives literally before death. Only then can you say as Socrates said, “No harm can befall a righteous man.” I'll put that in the gospel: “No harm can befall a dead man.” You cannot scare a person who is holding his own cadaver within his hands. He may be trembling down inside; but after the steamroller has gone over him, he is still standing there, trembling as he may. This is what I mean by divine humility, in which you embrace the total givenness of life. We have got to become humble in a new way.

Radical Benevolence

This is also radical benevolence. The detached person is the only one who has comprehensive concern. Do you understand that? The one who is driven by her security is always concerned for her family, her nation, or whatever else her idols define. The detached one is comprehensively concerned. This is an impartial concern. The only one who can be impartial is the one who is detached, who has given up the things of the world, if you please. It is an endless concern. I mean it is there every day. What I am pointing to is that if you are not continually concerned, you have not discovered what detachment is. It is unlimited concern, laying down one's life on behalf of others.

It is this detachment which is the basis of all society. The social structures of humanness – family, fraternity, nation, church – were based on this detachment. I might point out here the times when God acts in history and says, “No.” You remember Amos. He wasn't after those cows of Bashan wallowing in their riches because riches were wrong. Amos always attacked the religious dimension – their relationship to God – because that is the foundation of any social structure.

If you look for a moment at the revolutionary, you can see what I'm talking about. The revolutionary is the one who is loose from the given situation that he or she is in. The detached person is a perpetual revolutionary, the one that keeps society fluid, for only when society is fluid is it society. Watch that revolutionary who is always under the discipline of poverty.

Sacramental Portent

The last point is sacramental portent. One of the things that makes me unclear in this area is the external sign. The external sign is to the corporates what transparency is to meditation, contemplation, and prayer. Transparency is that which (and my poetry is very bad here) travels you to the Mystery, face to face.

I forgot the greatest quotation in the Jacob story I told the other day when I talked about meditation. At the end, all it says is this: “He saw God face to face and did not die!” Interesting, isn't it? That is the moment of transparency.

What I mean by this sacramental portent, or this external sign, is that which gets you to the world. It is that which gets poverty to the world. Poverty is a posture towards life. It is the posture of detachment. The sign is that which quickens it. I mean, I have to create a literal sign in history before this is anything else than an intellectual insight. That is what I mean by traveling the distance.

Let me illustrate that. About two weeks ago there was some trouble in the neighborhood here. When I heard about it, God made it clear that it had happened because of me. Do you understand what I mean? That wasn't anybody else's problem. It was my problem. I had done it, and it had happened to me. When you obey God in terms of forging a posture, that posture does not become alive until you make a sign. Now I get up about thirty minutes earlier than usual, and every day I'm on that street if at all possible. That is my sign in traveling the distance.

How else shall I say this reality comes to me? One of my boys came home one time with long hair. I don't worry about people criticizing me here and there, but when I misuse one of my boys, watch out. I had him cut his hair after I lied to him – I didn't know I was lying – well, I'm not sure of that (You have to keep your theology clean, don't you?) – I told him it was for the sake of a cause. What a fool! He did it. But he should have told me off, but he didn't. If he had told me off, I wouldn't have violated him. Do you understand? So I let *my* hair grow long. That was my traveling the distance.

I like to say if you live in the white suburbs, and if you are not willing to live in the crumminess of the ghetto, then you have *got* to live in the crumminess of the ghetto. But if you are willing, you don't have to. And then some people are just stupid, and they've got to. There are other people, as Kierkegaard says, who can do it in their imagination. Then there are people in between. Those are the ones who have to put all their furniture in a big van and drive it down to the ghetto, leave it all night, and then go back and put it all back in their house in the suburbs. This is the only way they can possibly know, so that this position becomes quickened and alive in their life.

So you have to become poor. That is literal. I want to underscore that. If you have got to have anything, if you have *got* to have your husband, if you have *got* to have your sanity, if you have *got* to have your children, if you have *got* to have your automobile. I've seen guys in our Order keep ice boxes around here two or three years locked up, because they couldn't get loose enough to say they didn't need them. I find people who keep their cars when they come here. They can't get loose from them. I have nothing against their keeping their cars, if they find another way to communicate to themselves that they own nothing.

On the flip side of that, then you don't have to become poor at all, because the disposition of poverty has nothing to do with how many goods you have, or how many you don't have. It doesn't have to do at all with how much money you have or don't have – on the other side of not having to have any of it. Then it gets transferred into the rubric of mission.

How does a person capture one of these signs? One man that comes here on the weekends has a rather luscious house in the suburbs. One day, sitting around at a party of some kind at his house, I looked over at him and said to the other people sitting around us, "One thing I know of this man and that is if tomorrow I needed this gorgeous house, he would give it to me." You should have seen the look on that man's face. I said, "Wouldn't you? Wouldn't you?" Very reluctantly, in a low voice, he said, "Yes."

Whatever the sign is, it has to be there. Without the sign, what I mean by detachment is not there at all. The person who is not detached has never authentically engaged in life. As Luther put it, he is always subtly serving himself. Only the detached person can labor to death without trying to save his own soul by his own labors. I'm talking about real poverty, folks.

Religious orders come in here, too. God bless them all. Sometimes you need a sign of your sign. If the man with the large house turns the deed over, let's say that would be a sign that he doesn't have to have it. But maybe he needs another sign. St. Francis tied a rope around himself, and every time he saw that rope, that reminded him of his sign that he was a detached man. Thereby he called upon himself to be universally benevolent.

The religious orders, oh my, the sign of poverty that they created. But that's been so misused. The worst thing about it is that today they don't even understand it anymore. Catholic priests are asking for a raise in salary. I was kidding a Sister the other day about the nuns taking off their habits. You see, every time – not every other time – every time anyone beheld a nun, they were held up to the sacrificial portent of detachment. It didn't make any difference whether they hated the nun or whether they respected and loved her. I mean, every time they passed a black habit, though they may never have known it, this happened to them. The sign of their clothing pointed beyond. I said to the Sister, "After all the blood has been spilt to get and keep the symbol of your habit in history, the Sisters come up and yank it off as if it were nothing,

and have all kinds of excuses about the modern world.” The religious orders in history have been a sign of the possibility and the glory of detachment. They have been an indication that a person is detachment and has to be a slave to none.

But you don’t have to go to the orders. Why, that man’s house, his not having to have it, his having come to terms with this, that’s a sacred sign that points beyond. This is like a sacrament itself. Indeed, it is a sacrament, an outward and visible sign of inward and spiritual grace. It is a call to humanness.

My last word is that you are not about to come off with anything remotely related to the revitalization of the local congregation if you have not taken upon yourself the discipline of poverty. One of the greatest social inventions that history has ever seen was the invention of the tithe. There was nothing pious about it. It was just the machinery worked out whereby if ten people gave up one-tenth of their income, they could have a guru sustained in their midst. By the time I came along the tithe didn’t seem to have any relation to authentic reality. In the beginning, however, the tithe was a sign that the person was detached from the world.

But whether it be that or another, a sign must be. And when that sign be’s, then it is a sacrament to everyone everywhere, pointing to the wondrous and glorious and painful deeps of being human, and to that Mystery which is beyond all of our petty gods.

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