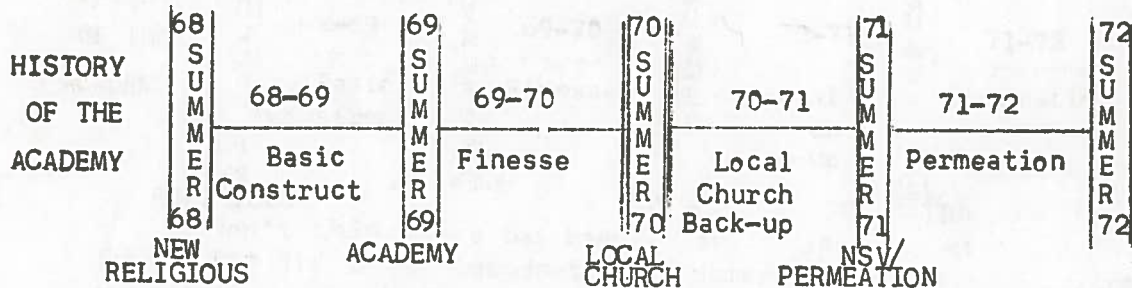


The Ecumenical Institute: Chicago
 Collegium
 Gene Marshall
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RSI: ACADEMY EDGE:
 THE OFFENSE OF THE GOSPEL

I want to talk a bit about the experience of the Academy since Summer '70, or the spirit edge of the spirit movement. The Academy has the opportunity of looking at what is going on in the spirit movement rather intimately. One of the things that has been seen without any question whatsoever is that Summer '70 is one of the most critical events that has ever happened to us. The history of the Academy since Summer '70 is obviously going to be different than it was before.



I don't think there has been an event since Summer '68 that did what Summer '70 did to our imagination. Summer '68 was the first summer that we put the new religious mode into the program. That was the summer we got up at 3:00 in the morning and had a three week program. At 3:00 a.m. we gave lectures that had never been given before. We didn't even have the word "new religious mode," but the lectures at that time were on the new religious mode. That whole year of 1968, with the beginning of religious houses that fall, saw an unbelievable transformation in the sense of coming into the struggle with the religious. Now we are in the year of the Local Church. Perhaps it can be looked at this way: Knowing the new religious was our struggle up until Summer '70. On this side of Summer '70 it is doing the new religious.

In the first year of the Academy, '68-'69, we created a basic construct for the Academy. This was conceived from the beginning as not only an academic reality but as an eight-week monastic experience, coming on the other side of Summer '68 and the religious. In the year '69-'70 we were after finesse in bringing that construct to a kind of completion. On this side of Summer '70 the Academy is most basically part of the local church back-up system. After Summer '71 permeation will be an important consideration for us. This gives us a brief picture of the history of the Academy.

I have experienced the Academy as a depository of great changes that take place in our whole reality. What has happened to the Academy since the series of events that made up Summer '70 I think is signal to get hold of.

The first is the invention of the secular religious celebration, which we do on Thursday night. The Ecclesiola construct as a whole goes something like this. The first week is on meditation, in which we do the meditation chart on Monday night, Kazantzakis on Wednesday night, and on Thursday night we have a game in the area of meditation. The next week is on prayer, the next week is on contemplation.

The game the first Thursday was one you might be interested in. It was on the meditative council. When people came to the Ecclesiola that night, we had everybody write down three dead churchmen that were intimate to them. Then they chose one of them whom they knew the best, wrote the name on a piece of paper and pinned it on their lapel, and were to function that evening as Bernard, Augustine, Paul, whomever they had chosen. Then when we came to the actual game, we had them go around and introduce themselves by saying a phrase that this person would say. Then we went around and had the rest of the group say some facts about each one of these people--who they were, what they knew about them in history. Then we picked one person in the group to sit at the head of the table, and we asked her or him which ones of these historical persons would be the ones they would talk to most and longest, and respect most in terms of making a critical decision in their life. So they picked one.

Sit that one at your right hand. What would be the next one? Put that one at your left hand. Arrange the whole table with respect to you, in terms of putting the ones you would talk to least at the foot, and then you have your right hand and left hand man up here.

As she got her table arranged, we asked her what she was going to talk to them about. One person would be running the show. She mentioned two or three subjects, and we picked a good one that would really work and not be too embarrassing. Then she talked with the group around the table, playing the role of herself, then playing the role of Paul, Augustine, and so on, through this particular problem.

That was a shocking experience. It is impossible to measure what happened to them relative to getting grounded what it means to have meditation. Ever since that night, "interior voices," "my council," "my friend," "my meditative friends" are like "intentionality" in terms of being just a part of the vocabulary. The emphasis all week long on meditation does something to the remaining parts of the Academy. I noticed it especially in Church History. When we went back to meet Luther, Augustine, Aquinas, and so on, we weren't just studying Church History. We were adding meditative friends onto our council. That added a dimension, a quality, to the course. One thing everybody had realized by then was that their council was a little thin when it got behind the nineteenth century.

The charting method also becomes life or death, once you begin to see that every one of those study sessions is meditation. When you sit down to chart a paper, this has to do with building up your council of colleagues that are going to help you through the year. I have never seen such an intense struggle with charting as we had last weekend. Two people broke down in tears because they thought they had it straight, and then didn't get it straight. Two people that missed it have been harassing me ever since to get somebody together with them to make up the weekend on charting.

Another example of the shift is the morning lectures on the new religious mode. Last year they were a little thin. There were good ones here and there, but on this side of Summer '70 those lectures have just been fantastic every morning. Ben Ball, whom some of you may know, a Gulf Oil executive from Houston, gave the lecture on poverty, and it was a happening. He took all the materials that we had put together through the summer and lectures that have been given before. It was one of the best hour presentations on poverty that I have ever run into. We are in a new year, a new situation in terms of our capacity to take the new religious mode charts and just electrify them, make them come alive.

Tactics has been another rather crucial shift. We never knew what tactics really meant. We didn't have that word defined last year. Getting said to ourselves what we meant by a tactic has changed our whole mindset toward workshops and labs. This has had an impact on the whole structure of our workshops. We haven't changed social methods much, but have just inserted the kind of awareness that broke loose. One of the awarenesses that helped us most was that of the difference between the visioning we did last summer in collegium and the more practical practical social methods; so we put the visionary methods at 5:00 a.m. and the gridding and problematting lectures right into the parish lab construct. That left more time in the morning for a broad vision on the role of the Church and the Local Church.

Nation and World, Community and Polis, Sociology and History--all seemed to have a new realism, too. It has more to do with the mood we're in now than with anything else, that we really are going to revolutionize the world. We really are going to out-revolutionize the Communists. That is a believable presupposition now. What it does to your mood when you go into those practices courses is hard to fathom. We really are going to redesign our cities.

We just came through Community and Polis in the Academy. Yesterday people built their models of the city. Those were some of the most fantastic models of what the city could become that you could ever believe. For instance, they organized a complete city into ecclesiolas of 32, on floors, and so on. They had many different ways of thinking through what living space was going to look like. Unbelievably creative ideas went into it. We worked on the economic problems of the city yesterday afternoon. I have never seen such a good problemat and a sense after how that would be.

But underneath that is something even worse. That is an awareness that there are no liberals left, just radicals. It isn't a question of whether or not you are going to be a radical. It's a question of what sort of radical you are going to be. Once you have seen to the depths of the new religious, to put social form on that is just radical without limits. That kind of awareness is shocking and trembling. And yet even suburban businessmen who are there because they are out of a job in this particular recession are clear that they are radicals, and not patchworkers. Housewives who have really never gotten outside their living room are aware that they are totally alienated from their friends and relatives, relative to their social stance in history. It is almost as if the possibility is more than you can stand. You feel--

this is a statement worthy of remembering for all of us--that our whole society is having a nervous breakdown over the possibility of having to radically rebuild itself out toward the future.

This means that all sorts of subtle death urges come into the mood of the Academy, because you are so lucid about the radical future. When you say you are going to move into the local church and do something, you really mean that you yourself and people just like us are going to do a global reformulation. This is not theory to keep you in being anymore. This is something like: "Tomorrow afternoon we are going home to the local church, and the whole of history is hung onto the other end of that."

In pedagogy guild the other day we were doing Paragraph 11 of Tillich. The teacher had discovered the word "hidden suicide" and was trying to ground it. My Lord, I thought the group would come unglued at the seams. We just had to stop and talk a bit about what was going on there in our response to the concept of "hidden suicide." It was as if the whole group was groaning and laughing at the same time, for most of us aren't quite ready to go jump off the bridge, but the more subtle ways out are contemplative possibilities at all times.

The present Academy has been known as the laughing Academy. The horrifying thing is that what they are laughing over is the pitiful weakness of themselves as they experience themselves over against such a wild tomorrow. Liz Banks from Australia was hosting breakfast a few days ago, and she said, "Let us take the gifts we have gotten so far in these first seventeen days of the Academy and go ..." Then she just stopped and said, "We have only been here seventeen days." The group just broke down in laughter. Then she said, "Let us go into the next five and one-half weeks and ..." and the group broke down again in laughter. Underneath this laughter is a deep prayer of petition: "Lord, have mercy."

But in spite of the excitement that is generated in the social methods and social vision, as well as the way into the religious, the most powerful course in the Academy is still RS-I. This has been so for five quarters at least. Every time, the pedagogy guilds are ecstatic turning points in the lives of literally everyone. Of the last four student evaluations, pedagogy weekends have been the number one happening without even a near rival.

When you look at the rest of the courses a similar kind of insight is there. In student evaluations of the courses of last fall's Academy Church History, New Testament, and Old Testament were the biggest events. Every other course was second to those three. You can see that those three courses are all on RS-I in one sense. They take RS-I back through the deeps of history. Other crucial events in the Academy were the Soren Kierkegaard paper, the Bonhoeffer "Community" paper, the JWM paper on the "Christ of History," and the John Knox paper which we also squeeze in.

I am sure that the rest of the Academy construct makes what happens in these places happen there. But why does it always happen there? That is a very crucial question, I think. Let me try to say in a few words why. I think this is meaningful for more than just running an Academy. It has

deep meaning for the whole spirit movement at this moment: RS-I is the gospel. It's the power of the gospel that's in that course that makes that course what it is.

The context of RS-I in the Academy is something like this. Underneath social vision and methods there is a deeper issue that presses on people. I want to call it prowess. Prowess in corporate life is a deep address every time. It's the realization that, "My God, I've got to go out and lead corporate life." That's the address. It's: "I don't understand accountability," and "What is a covenant now that we've" and "How do you really be a prior?" Prowess in the common task is also an address. Conducting a workshop is a push in this whole area.

In our work with the new religious mode what's going on is that the deep call of humanness is becoming conscious. This is an extremely deep call. When you press those new religious mode charts to the bottom, you have hold of spirit deeps that won't let loose of you. It's a practical problem now for most everybody--a practical problem of style. What kind of style of life do I have to put on? This is a deep question of style shopping for everyone that comes to the Academy. You need to get it said to yourself that you have to put on a style of life that is authentically global and authentically true to the deeps of the journey at the same time. This is, of course, profound without limit. It is not in the social methods and it is not in the social vision that revolutions take place. It is when they hit the pole of the religious.

Now why is that so? Maybe something like this would be helpful. The spirit deeps offer no forgiveness. Maybe that is a way to put it. The only thing they offer is radical and unconditional demand. That drives you to deeper despair. You can't articulate it. Practical vision or practical work never fills in the abyss of demand. A realistic vision only confirms the absolutely incredible depth of the immediate demands upon your life. The hard practical work never fills up the abyss of that demand. It is the constant arrival of the word of forgiveness that is the healing balm for an otherwise impossible pressure and guilt.

I need to ground that a little bit. Every day and every weekend RS-I comes as the Word itself. It just comes into your life as sheer happening. The actual situation of success or failure, weakness or strength is objectified, and decisions are made to move on in the face of that demand.

Let me try to intensify that a little bit. The struggle with style is facing the collapse of my most favorite roles. I think that is where it comes hardest. It is like this. I discover that my strength is really defensiveness. Or my gentleness is really cowardice. Or my maleness is without spirit push. Or my femaleness is ruthless and ashamed. Do you get the feel of those? Now the decision to say yes to my weak self and to abandon to oblivion all my safe fragments of integrity--this is pain "squared," maybe even to the third power. It is impossible to state how painful it is for human beings today to give up their favorite integrity.

And the gospel comes into the midst of that situation. Let me demonstrate with a little piece of poetry. "The offense of the gospel is standing in utter helplessness before God, receiving life moment by moment as a completely undeserved gift, a completely unachieved possibility, and a completely unmerited demand." That is the healing word.

I'll say it once more. You are in social methods and are struggling with the prowess of corporate life, and prowess with the common task. The anguish there is just facing the nitty-gritty responsibility that is yours now and yours worse out in the future--nitty-gritty responsibility for a colleague, getting that colleague to the next session, dealing with the role of accountability, and your personal inadequacies in doing those kinds of tasks. Priorship is dread-filling. Model-building is illusion-smashing. All the acts I've ever done are embarrassing to recall. Or you are experiencing a deep sense of "My God, there aren't any of us who know what to do," or "we don't do it well." So the decision to participate in real engagement is an occasion of wretched humbling. Even though there is excitement, there is also that sense of just being humbled before one's own ineptitudes at doing what one needs to be apt at. So again, the offense of the gospel comes into that situation where one is standing in the utter helplessness before God receiving life moment by moment as a completely undeserved gift, a completely unachieved possibility, a completely unmerited demand.

Or when you move in on RS-I itself, people's struggles with that course are with what I want to call weakness. That needs a word or two more to make it clear. A woman in the fall Academy was assigned to give a thirty minute lecture in pedagogy guild. And she collapsed. "I can't give that lecture," she said. "Why not?" "I just can't. I'm too scared." "What do you mean, you can't?" "I'm too scared, I'm not prepared, I'm not ready." "Well, you can decide to." "I suppose so, but I just can't. I'm not ready." "Why don't you go in and at least read the poetry." "Too scared. I won't do well." Do you get the feel of this? I am not dramatizing it very well because I don't have the tears. Then finally you try to get something communicated like, "Being anxious is what it means to be a great teacher. It shows you're sensitive. Your wobbling knees are accepted whether you accept them or not. Go on in there." Well, she goes in there and pulls it off, does an absolutely unbelievable job and teaches well in the last guild. How do you account for that kind of deep despair, which is really over your own weakness as you stand before that particular task?

Or I think of a girl in the last Academy who came in in tears and said, "I'm leaving." And you ask, "How long had you planned to stay?" "My pastor said if I don't stay for eight weeks he'll send me back." "Well, why are you leaving then?" "Well, you must think I'm just a perfect stupe," she said, and breaks down. "Everything I've heard I've heard in the wrong context. I'm still hung up in my second-story universe," and she breaks down in tears again. "You must have seen how ridiculous I am." Now, you have to give her a way to appropriate that weakness, for she's not really despairing over losing her second-hand universe. She doesn't want her second-hand universe. She is despairing over being caught in being so weak as to still be hung-up in such foolishness. So you have to give her a way to say that her weakness is to be appreciated as a great happening that happened to her life. Then once it dawns on her, the mood changes very quickly. It's unbelievable how quickly it can change. And so you say to her, "Well, why don't you stay for at least two more days and brood about it?" And she says, "OK, I will." Then as she goes out the door she says something like, "I'm so sorry I was so silly crying." And you say, "That's all right. You are received. Now go on."

That kind of dynamic is dramatic now and again but is real everywhere you look. Last weekend we did the Soren Kierkegaard paper, the section on introversion. In Paragraph Eight of that paper he says the reason why you are in despair is

that you are proud. That's your problem. The introverted man says back, "Impossible, look how wretched I am. I couldn't possibly be proud." Then Kierkegaard's imaginary voice inside the introvert who can't be penetrated says, "Well, the fact is that you want to be proud of yourself. And that's why you put such great weight on your weakness." Then Kierkegaard goes on to say that the problem with this man is the way his thought has turned. He is very near to salvation. But confronted with his own weakness, he takes the wrong turn into despair instead of humbling himself before his weakness. Then SK goes on to other comments such as, "The self must be broken in order to be itself transparently."

I think those words get hold of a deep edge in the spirit life for people we are running into today. Let me try to illuminate that in terms of the struggle with RS-I. In the God section and the Christ section people try to turn RS-I into a proud set of dogmas, sort of little truths that you use to hold your own over against your wretchedness. You know that "life is finite," that life is running away from life. You are clear about that like you are clear about everything in the world. In addition you know that life is "good/ received/ approved/ and/ open." But it's like you believe all that as gnostic propositions. You believe that life is good and you're OK. You believe that the past is approved and you'll be saved. So you get this sort of dogmatism that doesn't grasp the Word as something that happens in the concrete kairos of daily particularity, that the Word is a life or death issue of my radical life happenings. The offense of the gospel is standing in utter helplessness before God, receiving life moment by moment as a completely undeserved gift, a completely unachieved possibility, a completely unmerited demand.

When you move into the Freedom section, the escape comes out as an escape into proud freedom, without radical obligation to the awe of affirming God and neighbor in the particular encounters of life. Everything has to be grounded with what seems to me just a montage of illustrations to make that come off. You run into somebody who has said, "I decided to go home." "You have? Why?" "Well, I just decided." "Well, have you considered _____? Have you considered _____? Have you considered _____?" "Yes, but I want to." "How is that respecting the global revolution in history? How is that meeting the needs of _____, _____, _____?" You have to really demand careful participation in what is actually going on to get hold of where the escape is in freedom. You have to say to that person who is saying that they have to make a free decision, "Your spirit is in danger. You are about to give your freedom away." That exact conversation went on with a boy and he stayed. The offense of the gospel is standing in utter helplessness before God, receiving life moment by moment as a completely undeserved gift (that includes your freedom), an utterly unachieved possibility, a completely unmerited demand. To receive freedom moment by moment as a gift, rather than as a proud kind of achievement, is a deep deep struggle in RS-I.

In the Church section they want to escape into some group that possesses a strong quality of sensitivity and responsiveness, if you can find such a group. It's a sort of moralism. "I belong to the right group," or "I am among intentional people. I've joined an intentional club. I am intentional." A no has to be said over against that, a loud hard NO that makes it clear that being the Church is nothing but repentance. It is surrendering yourself to a dynamic that simply IS the structure of history. The Church is a structure of history, and that structure is the structure from which you are always in need of returning. The movement to be the Church is always,

not sometime, always repentance. The Church is infinitely strong, so strong it doesn't even need you. It's you and me that are weak. We are scaredy cats at all times relative to being the Church. Grace has to be the constant dependence if one is going to be "on the way" in the way life is. And you don't cease to be weak by being healed. The healed man faces his weakness all the more strongly and realizes that day by day he lives in radical dependence. Being the Church is a glory, but an undeserved glory, from which you can depart at any moment.

I understand now more clearly than I ever did before why Peter wanted to be crucified upside down. It is sort of like, the fact that I made it is a miracle, and I'm not worthy to be crucified right side up. There's something deeply exciting about that man's awareness of his weakness.

People have anxieties over their spiritual maladies, but even when those maladies give in there is a new anxiety, the anxiety over having been made well. You can imagine a picture of Jesus where he comes up to someone and says, "Do you want to be made well?" And the man says, "Yes." "All right, be well." And then the realization takes place. "Now what have I done?" the person thinks to himself. There is a death urge on the other side of spiritual healing. "I did have a real reason why I wasn't living my life." And now being healed puts you back in the crisis of possibility and makes you realize even deeper again how dependent the healed man is.

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