



Steps Toward a Modern Piety

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In a recently reported conversation with Joseph Sittler, we find this little item:

About three months ago I had a couple of hours with a man of mixed gifts but remarkable personality, William Sloan Coffin. He said, “What we gotta do from now on is to be vehement as hell about the perfectly obvious.” And I think he was right.¹

All those who know Bill Coffin personally will recognize this quotation as genuine. He is truly a prophet in our times who finds obscenity in those things that most of us take for granted in our culture. The “of course” is to him intolerable. It is precisely in those things which we label common sense that the prophet finds our most dangerous failures.²

My own use of this quotation is slightly different, but I hope just as important. All of my ministerial life, I have been intensely sensitive about the ordinary and obvious things that we do in religious living. In my seventies I cannot submerge my emotions when I talk about these things. In the public realm, I refer to the liturgy of the church—that which constitutes, gathers, and guides our communal thinking as Christians. I reserve the chance to talk about that at a later time. In the private realm, I refer to the conscious, unconscious, and subconscious activities which make up our religious living—our living consciously in the presence of the living God. I call this our piety. Most people have just inherited this way of living. It has not come into their conscious way of life; it is the realm of the “perfectly obvious.” There are some things so close to us that we cannot distance ourselves enough from them to analyze what we do. That is the case with our piety.

In our day, however, this piety must become the object of examination and re-formation. If we simply remained within our own province and went to church with people just like ourselves, we could very well carry on these

¹Quoted in *Religion and Intellectual Life* 4/2 (Winter, 1987) 64.

²Cf. Abraham Heschel, *The Prophets* (New York: Harper & Row, 1962) 9.

“perfectly obvious” ways of living and praying unconsciously. Our pluralistic society, however, throws people around, and many are coming into our church who have different shapes of Christian living. This results in confrontation and embarrassment—embarrassment because we must talk about it, but as yet we have not been able to analyze ourselves. It is only when we are confronted with different ways that we turn toward learning to know ourselves consciously.

I. SHAPES OF PIETY

Some years ago, in a lecture at Gettysburg Seminary, I attempted to analyze some of the shapes of piety—all different—that had come into Lutheran churches in the Northeast at that time.³ I listed five such shapes, and have since added a sixth. They are: evangelical piety, pietism, orthodoxy, secular piety, sacramentalism, and meditative piety.

Evangelical piety is familiar to all of us who have gone to Sunday School. In this movement, historically interdenominational, a lay leadership following Methodistic theology and practices projects a type of piety which has crossed denominational lines. The song “Yield Not to Temptation” is a fair introduction to this way of religious living. One thinks of life in this world as a journey through a desert land in which one should be able to map progress: where one is, how far one has come, and how far there is to go to the heavenly place. A particularly helpful exercise to keep this all together in some disciplined way is the habit of keeping a journal. Unfortunately the whole ethos of this way of religious living is shaped toward another world—not this one. Moreover, this way of life, by concentrating on disciplined works and progress, turns all of our attention to these works. Obviously Lutherans should be concerned here; yet a good majority of us are formed by this piety.

Pietism is a close ally of evangelical piety. There was a warm interchange between the early Methodists and pietists through the Moravians, which influenced English hymnody through the Wesleys. I think of pietism as a devotion to Christ for our salvation where the emotions are primary. It highlights the Reformation experience of justification by grace through faith and returns to this theme again and again. Reacting against the approach of the mind to doctrine and liturgy, pietism centers on the heart’s devotion and on the Scriptures which are the source of our faith. Pietism is a direct descendant of medieval devotion to our Lord as our Redeemer, and as such is a first cousin to the Marian devotion of the Roman Catholics.⁴ Bonhoeffer’s critique of pietism reveals its weak point. He found it intensely private, disdainful as to what was happening in this world and unwilling to take a stand; the pietists were more concerned about their heavenly path. Bonhoeffer cries out for a “religionless Christianity,” that is, a

³Cf. Henry E. Horn, *The Christian in Modern Style* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1968), chapter 2, “Crisis in Piety.” This book came out at the wrong time. It is only now that our attention has turned to spirituality. Much of what I say in this article simply grows out of this former work.

⁴It is in the recent books on hymn texts that we find the keenest observers of shapes of piety. Most of us will use any texts with a good tune. Who knows how confused our idea of the Christian life may become through our profligate use of hymns!

way of religious living that is not pietism, but which takes our world experience seriously as the context of God’s concern.

Orthodoxy originally meant “right worship.” In the Lutheran tradition, however, we have used the word for “right teaching.” It comes from the period after the Reformation when Lutherans were gathering their life together into well-rounded statements and principles which would enthrone the Reformation discoveries.⁵ In our own time, we have known Lutheran orthodox pastors who, in attending their pastoral conferences, bring their *Book of Concord* and their Greek New Testaments for a discussion which earnestly seeks the truth. A like movement of orthodox musicians seeks the mind’s approach to the church’s music. In fact, it is in the shock

of strange music from orthodox piety that most of us pietists encounter this type of piety coming to us in our larger Lutheran context in the *Lutheran Book of Worship*. The main problem with orthodoxy is not its search for the truth; we need that badly. The problem is how one can be devoted to the truth and to love at the same time. In our intent to defend the classical statements of centuries ago, we often turn our backs on all of the rest of current Christendom.

Secular piety is simply a name I have given to a residue of a past Calvinist faith in my part of the country, but one which pervades the whole land. Robert Bellah calls it “civil religion.” It lurks under the surface and is brought to light in the efforts of popular evangelists, and in appeals to “American values.” In many ways it is the residue left over when the dominating colonial Calvinist faith was diluted. The concept of the Elect of God became the chosen country. When the concept of transcendence evaporated, we were left with a misty residue which permeates American public life. Every pastor, in reaching out to his or her members who rarely attend, knows the type of secular piety that dwells there and produces religious clichés. One of the unanswered evangelistic challenges is how to minister among these people without diluting the Christian realities.

Sacramentalism has overtaken some of us lately. It comes to us from our use of service books. It was in the last century that the liturgical movement opened to us the riches of the church’s tradition of worship. Sacramentalism says: “You are worried about your life of prayer. Open up to what the church has always done in its tradition of corporate and private prayer. The materials are right there before you. Use it intelligently, and your goal will be attained.” I was completely carried off by this enticement and used the offices of the church for my private prayer for a time.⁶ But I soon found that I was no monk and the office tradition which we have in our service books is that which comes down to us from a whole tradition of those who gave themselves completely to work and prayer. It stands before me as an open cornucopia—the large end throws more at me than I can handle. I need something more elementary which mixes my daily

⁵Ever since the seventeenth century pietists and orthodox have been in contention. This is natural since pietism arose as a reaction to orthodoxy. In the *Lutheran Book of Worship* the two pieties clash rather sharply, particularly in music.

⁶I was a follower of Luther D. Reed and the liturgical movement which brought about the *Service Book and Hymnal*.

experience with surprises. Yet parts of a sacramental piety have crept into the habits of all.

Meditative piety is something my children learned in the sixties and seventies, now nourished in the women’s movement. The discovery of Eastern methods of meditation introduced to many the ways in which the discipline of the body can influence thought and emotion. Much good has come from these discoveries—not the least of which is their presence in our very own tradition also. One thing, however, we are learning. Meditative disciplines are instruments; they do not provide the content of meditation. They should be hitched to something else in order to heighten a content which has another source.

Evangelical piety, pietism, orthodoxy, secular piety, sacramentalism, and meditative piety were the forms that I presented years ago.⁷ The effort provided understanding for many pastors who were receiving new members from other backgrounds. I would presume that such an

analysis now in some of our urban areas would turn up a much wider range of possibilities. We are just now coming out of a rather protected provincial life. Our church mergers and our new hymnbooks present greater variety. Perhaps the greatest mixture of ways of Christian living is fostered by our insistence on a wide variety of hymn texts. Each one contains in compressed metaphors the high points of a particular shape. If Lutherans takes these words seriously, then already we are eclectic in our piety, for we use bits and pieces without really trying to think the thing through.

II. INADEQUACY OF PAST PIETIES

All of these shapes of piety come down to us from a distant past. Historical study will show that they took about seventy-five years, or several generations, to grow and gain their shape. All come from ages before our modern world and the age of science and industry. They assume a much different world of time and space. Thus for all of us who use them—and we all do in one way or another—comes the discipline of imagining another world than our very own. To use them requires us to be schizoid. We have to live in a past age while still living in the present. Our imagination is trained to picture the past, and this leaves it unused in imagining what might be in the present.

Our need is obvious. We need to live today in a religious way, that is, consciously, unconsciously, and subconsciously we need to feel, act, and pray in terms of our very own life's experience. After all, if we live, as Luther says, *coram Deo*—in the presence of the living God—there should be some indication of a new shape of life expressing that consciousness.

Lutherans are tentative about this. All around us we see shapes of piety which take over life and produce a new set of good works. Though we ourselves know that our answer for what God has done for us in Jesus Christ should be thanksgiving, we shy away from any discipline of life. It is too easy to set up a discipline; that then becomes a new work. We insist on evangelical freedom in which each person responds in his or her own way. Yet thanksgiving cannot re-

⁷See *The Christian in Modern Style*, chapter 2.

main a diffuse mist; thanksgiving grows in concrete acts. Jews have taught us this in making acts of thanksgiving—*berakoth*—the building blocks of the religious life. Some such discipline is called for.

Moreover, we don't start from scratch. All human life follows some shapes from the past. Though we have been critical of shapes of past pieties, we are still impressed at the efforts of men and women to live religiously in response to what God has done for them. Actually no form of piety is to be despised, and a good number of their disciplines, taken separately as instruments, can be used over again. On the other hand, one feels a great relief when one sheds a past form of piety and realizes that its demands need not be taken that seriously, but that one can have the freedom to start over again.

III. PERSONAL EXPERIENCE

When speaking of piety, one would expect to start from personal experience. In my early ministry, I was hounded by two problems: (1) how does a minister carry on the life of prayer so necessary especially for the ordained clergy person?; and (2) how can the minister find

inspiration for the countless times the minister is required to speak?

In trying to work out the first problem, I was for years caught in a pietistic shape of prayer, though I also tried orthodoxy and sacramentalism. I was never able to match up my available time and energy with the visions of these I had from the past. Mental pictures of clergymen on their knees before dawn kept popping into my mind. Then I came across an article by R. E. C. Browne which described a modern shape of prayer as being an oscillation between work and prayer, and prayer and work, mixing the two in a style which was very much like my own style of pastoral ministry.⁸ This resulted in a sense of freedom from the bonds of past shapes and made me ready to see oscillation between two poles as the essence of living and praying.

The second problem, however, was different. Finding some source of inspiration required a sharpened focus on what was going on around me in the world. I had inherited from my piety a confidence in God's providential guidance. Surely there was much more here than met the eye. I would start focusing my vision. I would purchase a record book. Starting from front to back I would put down everything which surprised me: articles, passages in my reading, conversations, and thoughts. Then starting from back and moving to the front, I would chronicle where I was and what I was doing and thinking, for moments of surprise are chance intersections of life's experiences. I would then see whether this discipline could help with the problem of inspiration.

Over the years I have filled almost one hundred similar octavo volumes. At first it was quite painful and unrewarding, but I persisted to the time when I had several filled volumes. Then the excitement fed on the discipline. I loved to re-read where I had been and what I had thought, and ponder where I would go from there. Certain separate disciplines evolved over the years.

⁸See R. E. C. Browne, "Piety," *Theology* 65 (1962) 316-21. The principle of oscillation as constant in human life is the basis of an excellent study by Bruce Reed, *The Dynamics of Religion: Process and Movement in Christian Churches* (London: Darton, Longman & Todd, 1978).

Obviously, the first of these disciplines was focusing attention, attending with all my abilities to what was going on around me. Not only did this mean increasing care in observation and recording—using adjectives and adverbs to give color to the pictures—but there followed the disciplines of remembrance which re-reading developed.

Second, as the material became more substantial, I found that my interests criss-crossed and brought forth some shapes of experiences. It was something like the experience of a child filling in a paper with numbers: drawing a line between 1 and 2 and 3 and so on...till there appears the shape of a bunny or an owl. These shapes enlarged my knowledge by revealing the connecting lines—it was the discipline of understanding, of connecting.

Third, I found that in using the material in my books for speeches, I had to set out the conflicting points of view I had collected and invest part of myself into deciding where I would take my temporary stand. This discipline was that of deciding—one that involves a jump of risk.

Fourth, after some experience with these experiences, I found that I was prepared to speak on a number of topics from understanding. I had to judge between positions and take my own considered position. This was the final discipline in a number: attending, understanding, deciding, and judging. Of course, during my own discoveries with my record books, I was not conscious of these disciplines; it is only in retrospect, and in discovering that they coincide with Bernard Lonergan's "transcendental method of insight," that I have been able to give them his names.⁹

It was in this process that I came across Browne's article on prayer as a form of oscillation between work and prayer. It was easy then to conclude that in a way my life of surprise with my record books could be regarded as identical with prayer. That suspicion simply led me to more intentional efforts.

IV. BIBLICAL PERSON

Missing from my records of surprise, however, was my whole effort surrounding the preparation of sermons. That was recorded in the sermons themselves, alas now simply drawers full of full outlines. The life has gone out of them into those to whom they were addressed. It would be fascinating but impossible now to weave this discipline of interpretation of Scripture into the fabric of life that the record books reveal. *That* would indicate the shape of my piety.

Lonergan insists on this dimension also as he adds conversion as the final element. By conversion he means falling in love and experiencing the consequences in every level of one's being.

For me, the disciplines of life were divided into two quite separate compartments: that of ordinary life around me, and that of my life in the church, biblically and liturgically. I would hope that each would maintain its character: that my disciplines represented by my journals of surprise would be very much

⁹Cf. Bernard Lonergan, *Insight: A Study of Human Understanding* (London and New York: Longman & Green, 1957). I tried several times to wade through *Insight*. It was not until I had tried on the disciplines to see whether they matched with what I had found out that I read Lonergan with real excitement.

of every day life *now*; and that my disciplines of biblical thinking and of the liturgy would be as truly of the biblical world and of the traditional liturgy as possible.

This recreates the position of a bi-lingual person.¹⁰ This person thinks in two languages. He or she counts those moments rare and striking when the two worlds intersect and a startlingly new insight pops out. This has often been described as the heart of imaginative discovery today. Certainly I can testify that it is the exciting fruit of living in these two worlds. The excitements of new discoveries bring me to open up my experience to others as what has happened in one life.

Others may try to put the life of religious living together in other patterns. I simply wish this testimony to spark others' experience with experiences.

V. A FINAL ANALOGY

About a year ago, my wife and I attended an exhibit on Chinese Culture in the Boston Museum of Science. The exhibit had brought along working artists to demonstrate their crafts. Especially moving to me was the weaver, sitting on top of a high loom, making a tapestry. The unused spools were attached behind the seated weaver, bringing him the threads for his weaving. His attention was fully involved in the skills of the moment as he thrust the shuttles back and forth in the obviously disciplined patterns of his art. And in front of him—in full view, if he could look up—lay the marvelous patterns he had created.

The memory of this picture has served as a metaphor of the shape of my piety. Engaged as I am with the daily routines of life, I rarely look at the future which is coming toward me, or at the territory I have covered. If someone asks me for some certain prediction about the future, I

am at a loss—I can only remain constant in my faith that God is faithful from whom the future comes. If one would ask me about the present, I can only say that our presents are too important for us to ignore those disciplines that will open our eyes and all our senses to what is going on around us, and take our part with all our trained skills. I would pray that this activity would be as though done in the presence of God.

If one should ask about the past, there in my 100 volumes are laid out the whole fabric of my life in these past decades. There the guidance of God is evident in so many ways. This is material which belongs right in my own experience. I can and will talk about what has happened to me. I just wish that others could likewise testify to their own experience. Such testimony is widely lacking among Lutherans.

Since I have retired, I have had opportunity to teach in two of our seminaries, and I have offered a course called “Steps Toward a Modern Piety.” This article is a condensation of what we covered. A good deal of the students’ time was spent in rediscovering with me the surprises in everyday life brought by seminal books and articles. Their excitement of discovery has encouraged me. Their judgment that the new shape hasn’t jelled yet is perhaps accurate. I have discovered some things. Now it is high time for others to take over.

¹⁰See *The Christian in Modern Style*, chapter on “Bi-lingual Man: Ministry” (especially p. 132).