

Love and Saint Francis of Assisi: A *Mass* Performer in the Middle Ages

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*No one
Is granted such prodigious love as he:
The love that has no hope of being loved.*

— Jorge Luis Borges¹

Saint Francis can be viewed as a *postmodern* contemporary to countless movements and radicals in the 21st century. His personhood has all the elements of a flamboyant melodrama except for the fact that there is a historical being, the *truth* of whose life is stranger than a work of fiction could possibly be. In recognizing the reality of the person, history has absolved the saint from being a lyrical episode in a cosmic narrative for us to acknowledge his humanity, the very history that Francis the performer is determined to subvert at all costs. Adrian House, in his biography, writes of Francis:

Spending most of his life out of doors, in all seasons, his vision of man's place in nature and the universe was as intense and apocalyptic as William Blake's or Walt Whitman's. His anthem of praise to God on this theme, *The Canticle of Brother Sun*, composed during his final illness, was one of his last and most memorable achievements. It is also the first poem in Italian to survive, and is said to have inclined Dante to write *The Divine Comedy* in Italian rather than Latin.²

In "spending most of his life out of doors, in all seasons" Francis defies the basis of what we call civilized existence; if history is about progress in terms of making human life secure from nature's vagaries, Francis rejects such a conception of history, along with its false sense of security, in order to situate human life in and as the natural world. By making the life outdoors a way of discovering "man's place in nature and the universe," Francis goes back to the first phase of human history – the nomad on a

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¹ Jorge Luis Borges, "Baruch Spinoza," *Selected Poems*. trans. Willis Barnstone (New York: Viking, 1999), 383.

² Adrian House, *Francis of Assisi: A Revolutionary Life* (New Jersey: Hidden Spring, 2001), 11.

primeval journey walking the lonely earth in terror of the unknown. The birth of the sacred happens at the point when the nomad appeals to nature and the universe to preserve its being. A performer of the sacred is similar to the subject in Yeats' "The Heart of a Woman," who abandons the confines of a secure home to be with the lover: "O What to me the little room / That was brimmed up with prayer and rest; / He bade me out into the gloom, / And my breast lies upon his breast."³ The romance with nature and the outdoors came to Francis as part of the troubadour tradition that he inherited from his mother. House writes, "whatever role he was playing – dandy, merchant, lover or soldier – and whatever he was doing – preaching, nursing lepers or dying – Francis remained a troubadour."⁴

Everything that is earthly and erotic becomes sublime and spiritual. The making of a romance with other worlds is the essence of Francis' performance because it uses *this* world as a stage for its self-characterization combined with the dedication of a brilliant actor in love with his part. In "Towards a Poetics of Performance," Richard Schechner notes that:

A theater is a place whose only or main use is to stage or enact performances. It is my belief that this kind of space, a theater place, did not arrive late in human cultures (say with the Greeks of the fifth century BCE) but was there from the beginning—is itself one of the characteristics of our species. The first theaters were ceremonial centers—part of a system of hunting, following food sources according to a seasonal schedule, meeting other human bands, celebrating, and marking the celebration by some kind of writing on a space: an integration of geography, calendar, social interaction, and the proclivity of people to transform nature into culture.⁵

The performance that Francis enacts is a species characteristic celebrating *space*, any space and *all* space, thus rejecting the distinction between actor and audience, a distinction that will be a feature of theater at a later stage in history. In the earliest phases of human history, theater is a collective performance. Like in the "ceremonial centers" that were the "first theaters," the Franciscan performance integrates "geography, calendar, social interaction, and the proclivity of people to transform nature into culture."⁶ However, in the case of St. Francis, the performance goes one step further by rejecting any human barrier between this world and the others. The space in which St. Francis performs is both infinity and beyond, and he becomes both character and author of the performance. This is a postmodern anti-narrative with a strong poetic character; it does not have a fixed plot or purpose. It constantly defies any attempt towards conceptualizing it in categorical terms. There is no question of finding an audience to the mass performer who has made performance the meaning of his or her existence. From birds to fishes, flowers, insects and the poorest of the poor it is one

³ W. B. Yeats, "The Heart of the Woman," *The Collected Poems*. http://ebooks.gutenberg.us/DjVu_Collection/DJEDS/YEATS/POEMS/Download.pdf

⁴ House, 13.

⁵ Richard Schechner, *Performance Theory* (New York: Routledge, 2005), 149.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 149.

long celebration of nature's mysteries. In his hauntingly beautiful letter *De Profundis* written to his lover Lord Alfred Douglas while imprisoned in Reading Gaol, Oscar Wilde poignantly writes of Saint Francis:

God had given him at his birth the soul of a poet, as he himself when quite young had in mystical marriage taken poverty as his bride: and with the soul of a poet and the body of a beggar he found the way to perfection not difficult. He understood Christ, and so he became like him.⁷

What makes Francis a mass performer is the element of demonstration that pervades his life. There is a child-like need in Francis to tell the story of his strange, esoteric life while he actually is living it. In a literal manner Francis justifies the meaning of the phrase "person in the street." Francis is that person on, in and of the streets; he is both the mass that is the audience in the theater and the nameless, countless masses that are perpetual outsiders of History. The demonstration is an existential need to unconditionally love in the case of Francis. It is this element of love that Francis is constantly attempting to demonstrate that makes him a mass performer. It is his only avenue for discovering the "truth" of his actions. In a chapter titled "Faith and a sense of truth," Stanislavski makes the following observations about what we call "truth" in the context of the theater:

Of significance to us is: *the reality of the inner life of a human spirit in a part and a belief in that reality. We are not concerned with the actual naturalistic existence of what surrounds us on the stage, the reality of the material world!* This is of use to us only in so far as it supplies a general background for our feelings. What we mean by *truth* in the theatre is the scenic truth which an actor must make use of in his moments of creativeness. Try always to begin by working from the inside, both on the factual and imaginary parts of a play and its setting. Put life into all the imagined circumstances and actions until you have completely satisfied your *sense of truth*, and until you have awakened a *sense of faith* in the reality of your sensations. This process is what we call *justification* of a part.⁸

In a way Stanislavski's argument summarizes the Franciscan mass performance because it emerges from a belief in the reality of his inner life. Francis begins working on his performance from within his own self and puts life into the role that he is playing. The demonstration is essential to Francis because he must be satisfied with his "sense of truth" and it must awaken in him a "sense of faith" in the reality of his feelings.

Almost with the obsession of a scientist experimenting in a laboratory Saint Francis seeks to *know* the meaning of (his) faith. The *popular* demonstration of faith is a technique meant to perfect the performance. Lawrence S. Cunningham subtitled his biography of Francis "Performing the Gospel Life." Cunningham notes in his foreword that:

Franciscan originality derived from the success that Francis had in "performing" the

⁷ Oscar Wilde, *De Profundis*. <http://www.gutenberg.org/files/921/921-h/921-h.htm>

⁸ Constantin Stanislavski, *An Actor Prepares* (New York: Roudedge/Theater Art Books, 1989), 129.

gospel...The success of his enterprise energized a flourishing new stream of “acting out” the gospel that not only affected religious thought and practice but also gave energy to those forces that, in fact would give shape, among other things, to the Italian Renaissance.⁹

That subtle distinction between living and being is important to the performer. Being is the situation in which one *is* whereas living is about performance. In a philosophical sense one *is* in the same sense that one attributes being to a rock or a cloud. Living however is about identification; in the process of identifying oneself whether with an idea or a person one actually lives. Kenneth Baxter Wolf observes that “If living a life in *imitatio Christi* is the single most important criterion for Christian sanctity, Francis has a legitimate claim to being considered the medieval saint par excellence. The most consistent theme uniting all of the earliest literature about Francis is precisely his identification with Jesus.”¹⁰ The life of the performance is in action whereas being is restricted to experiencing life as it happens to each one of us. In Pirandello’s classic *Six Characters in Search of an Author* the Manager speaks about the stage to the Father who is one of the “characters” in the play searching for an “author:”

Your soul or whatever you like to call it takes shape here. The actors give body and form to it, voice and gesture. And my actors—I may tell you—have given expression to much more lofty material than this little drama of yours, which may or may not hold up on the stage. But if it does, the merit of it, believe me, will be due to my actors.¹¹

In performing the gospel, Francis takes away the distinction between being and living. He attempts to produce a new conception of reality through performance by completely identifying himself with Jesus and in internalizing the sufferings of his master. Stanislavski has an interesting piece of advice to actors preparing to perform their roles:

Most actors before each performance put on costumes and make-up so that their external appearance will approximate that of the character they are to play. But they forget the most important part, which is the inner preparation. Why do they devote such particular attention to their external appearance? Why do not they put make-up and a costume on their souls?¹²

The performance of love that St. Francis made the goal of his existence is a reliving of the life of Christ. Instead of devoting attention to external appearance, Francis is ready to spiritually transform himself in order to play the character of Jesus. While it is a part that Francis believes in with his body and soul, it is only through personal

⁹ Lawrence S. Cunningham, *Francis of Assisi: Performing the Gospel Life* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2004), ix.

¹⁰ Kenneth Baxter Wolf, *The Poverty of Riches: St. Francis of Assisi Reconsidered* (Oxford, OUP, 2003), 39.

¹¹ Luigi Pirandello, *Six Characters in Search of an Author*, trans. Edward Storer. <http://www.ibiblio.org/eldritch/lp/six.htm>

¹² Stanislavski, 265.

suffering inflicted upon his body that he can actually know the extent of his identification with the sufferings of Jesus. In the process of performing the life of Christ through the achievement of a “true creative inner state,”¹³ Francis the man transcends the barriers of social order in becoming Saint Francis *of* Assisi. The stage is not an illusion but somewhere at the margins of reality where history meets the present. The actor who acts his or her life is conscious of the performance. The actor who *lives* through the performance gives a new meaning to living itself. Hester G. Gelber in “A Theater of Virtue: The Exemplary World of Saint Francis of Assisi,” writes, “to be exemplary is to be exemplary to others; it is to perform for an audience expected to interact with the exemplary person in what may be a great variety of ways. To grasp the intricacies of teaching by example, we must try to describe the intersection of personality, role and social context.”¹⁴ Pedagogy is built into the Franciscan performance. It’s a performance meant to have a determining influence on life (and the lives of others) around you.

The social context of the Middle Ages is easier to grasp than the role that Francis invented for himself and his own complex personality. In the introduction to *The Worlds of Medieval Europe*, Clifford Backman observes that an essentially unified worldview guided Europe during the Middle Ages:

Medieval civilization was an alloy, the product of the amalgamation of three distinct cultures: classical Rome, Latin Christianity, and early Germanic society. It was a civilization that, for all its ethnic, social, and political plurality, regarded itself as an organic whole. The medieval worldview regarded life as an essential unity—that is, it believed that there existed a super-arching unifying structure, divinely and naturally ordained, that held together and gave meaning to the obvious pluralism and diversity of everyday existence. This unifying vision is the most distinctive characteristic of the medieval mentality.¹⁵

The postmodern performer in Francis is a far more complex one than what the “medieval mentality” could dare comprehend in its quest for a “unifying vision.” The life of Francis is anything but one that would have made sense to a medieval European. Backman has the following to say about the character of Francis in the context of medieval Europe.

Francis was as disorganized a person as one might ever imagine, and for years he avoided writing a Rule for his group; when he did finally produce one it was so vague and shapeless as to be effectively useless. He was not opposed to the life of the mind, but he much preferred the gifts of the heart. His sermons and various other writings—he excelled at poetry—do not dazzle one with ideas and insights, but they reverberate in the heart.¹⁶

¹³ *Ibid.*, 265.

¹⁴ Hester G. Gelber, “A Theater of Virtue: The Exemplary World of Saint Francis,” *Saints and Virtues*, ed. John Stratton Hawley (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1987), 15-16.

¹⁵ Clifford R. Backman, *The Worlds of Medieval Europe* (Oxford: OUP, 2003), 2.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 358.

It is that disorganization peculiar to Francis' personality that makes him an antithesis to the age in which he lived. This however does not imply that someone like Francis would have been seen as "normal" in other ages or times. But certainly it would make sense to say that the Middle Ages as a historical period are easier to comprehend than the role Francis was destined to play in changing the world.

Gelber observes that "rooted in the underlying structure of Francis's personality" are "two demands" or "two virtues:" one is the "requirement that he nurture others" and the other is "ascetic self-denial."¹⁷ While the former demands that he preserve himself to the extent that he is able to serve others, the latter is taken to an extreme point where physical suffering becomes almost a virtue. In Rossellini's movie *The Flowers of Saint Francis* (1950) there is a scene where Francis demonstrates to one of his followers what "perfect happiness" is. They go to a house where they seek "charity" and the owner of the house throws them out in the most insulting and humiliating manner. At that point Francis tells the brother: "Brother Leone, lamb of God, now that we've suffered all this for Christ it is perfect happiness. Above all the graces which Christ gives His followers, is the grace to conquer oneself and to endure suffering for love of Him."¹⁸ In calling the world of Saint Francis a "theater of virtue," Gelber makes an important point: that the universal love of Saint Francis is indeed a performance. I insist on calling it universal love because, while its roots are Christian, it has a strong secular character. The latter emerges from the fact that St. Francis, while deeply rooted in his faith, constantly transcends the limits of institutional religion, which is what makes him unique among Catholic saints and more than just a saint canonized by the Church two years after his death. Wendy Murray has the following to say about what gives Francis the kind of "universal appeal for which he is best remembered:"

Even as it was summoned in his day, the name of Saint Francis is still appropriated to rally people around troubling issues. Spiritual leaders, social activists, and others identify him with their respective causes, whether it is peace, ecology, or the defense of animals. Francis of Assisi carries universal appeal. He was loved by the common people, and the Church had the good sense to know the institution thus needed him. So those within the context of the Church have likewise appropriated him, though Francis' lifestyle and conviction contradicted in starkest terms the system being modeled by the Roman Church at the time he lived. Everyone knew this.¹⁹

Because the love that Francis subscribes to is both universal and secular it is possible for such diverse groups and individuals to appropriate him as if he belonged to them. These diverse causes find a mirror in the life and love of Saint Francis.

In his *Autobiography* Bertrand Russell speaks of a Columbia lecture where he got into trouble for saying that "what the world needs is 'love, Christian love, or compas-

¹⁷ Ibid., 16.

¹⁸ *The Flowers of Saint Francis*. Dir. Roberto Rossellini. Perf. Aldo Fabrizi. Cineriz, 1950. Film.

¹⁹ Wendy Murray, *A Mended and Broken Heart: The Life and Love of Francis of Assisi* (New York: Basic Books, 2008), 183.

sion.”²⁰ This was a disappointment to the atheists and a source of joy to believers. Russell goes on to add:

I spoke of *Christian* love, I put in the adjective ‘Christian’ to distinguish it from sexual love, and I should certainly have supposed that the context made this completely clear. I go on to say that, ‘If you feel this you have a motive for existence, a guide in action, a reason for courage, and an imperative necessity for intellectual honesty. If you feel this, you have all that anybody should need in the way of religion.’²¹

Russell finds universal meaning to Christian love because strictly speaking it’s not something we need to expect from someone merely because he or she is a Christian. As Russell notes, “It seems to me totally inexplicable that anybody should think the above words a description of Christianity, especially in view, as some Christians will remember, of how very rarely Christians have shown Christian love.”²² Freud however takes a critical view of universal love as distinguished from sexual love. In his *Civilization and its Discontents*, Freud says that “an unchangeable, undeviating, tender attitude” is ultimately possible owing to “far-reaching mental transformations of the erotic function.”²³ Freud adds, “Saint Francis of Assisi may have carried this method of using love to produce an inner feeling of happiness as far as anyone.”²⁴ From the Freudian point of view, love is a *particular* activity directed towards specific persons for specific reasons, while universal love makes no distinction between one body and another. In fact the love that Francis practices does not make a distinction between human beings and animals either and responds to both of them with the same boundless affection. The problem with universal love is that it is free of the pangs and disappointments of human love rooted in flesh and blood. Freud makes “two principal objections” against universal love. “A love that does not discriminate seems to us to lose some of its own value, since it does an injustice to its object. And secondly, not all men are worthy of love.”²⁵ The point that Freud misses is that in not “discriminating,” and in the profound belief that all beings are equally worthy of love, Francis demonstrates that there is a love that is not just “sexual.” He transcends the limits that sexual love through its unending demands that emerge from the personhood of the other being where choices are made on a selective basis, placed on human beings. In other words, sexual love is about how feelings function on an everyday basis. Those who invest in love must also brace themselves for a devastated ego or what can be rejection in the most terrible ways possible. What is imperative to sexual love is the fact that there is an ephemeral side to all attraction. Both the ecstasy and the agony are two sides of love rooted in desire. The demands of sexual love are in the reality of

²⁰ Bertrand Russell, *Autobiography* (London: Routledge, 2009), 501.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 501.

²² *Ibid.*, 501.

²³ Sigmund Freud, *Civilization and its Discontents* (Buckinghamshire, UK: Chryson Associates Limited, 2005), 20.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 20.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 20.

the other person's needs and desires. In universalizing love St. Francis, according to Freud, is actually moving outside the realm of the senses. There is no reason however to believe that St. Francis is unconscious of his own motives or that he is free of doubts when it comes to the role of sublimation of the sexual instinct in producing inner harmony. Whether a love that is non-sexual is an outcome of sublimation or not is ultimately a matter of perspective. But the fact is that it is an idea that enters the domains of a culture as a possibility or a common meaning.

"Culture is ordinary," writes Raymond Williams.²⁶ A culture has two aspects: the known meanings and directions, which its members are trained to; the new observations and meanings, which are offered and tested. These are the ordinary processes of human societies and human minds, and we see through them the nature of a culture: that it is always both traditional and creative; that it is both the most ordinary common meanings and the finest individual meanings.²⁷ The "ordinary common meanings" are those meanings which are already there in a social order whereas the "finest individual meanings" are those produced by men and women who creatively dedicate themselves to infusing the ordinary meanings with beauty and light that they did not possess before. In taking the theater of his faith to an entirely new level, Francis can be understood as a cultural theorist of performance. His performative understanding of Christianity is rooted in the *life* of Christ as reproduced in the gospels. For Francis, Christianity compelled believers to perform by living like Christ. The association with poverty is the fine individual meaning that Francis gives his faith. To live like Christ is to live like the poor and embrace dispossession of worldly goods. To the poor masses that are in a majority this unconditional love of poverty is a revolutionary (and political) reading of the gospel. The precise point where performance and popular culture come together is the point where Francis renounces material joys for an existence of pain and deprivation. Like Gandhi in the 20th century he joins the ranks of the poor in order to become one with them body and soul. Louis Fischer in his *The Life of Mahatma Gandhi* makes the following incisive statement: "A photograph taken shortly after his return to India shows him seated on a platform, legs crossed, nude but for a short loincloth, making a speech while around him stand Indian politicians in European clothes. He soon told them to shed those garments. How could persons in Bond Street suits or Bombay courts and trousers win peasant support?"²⁸ Both Francis and Gandhi perform their faith. Both are able to deeply impact the "ordinary common meanings" of their cultures to throw new light on these meanings. The most important of those meanings is what Schumacher talks about when he uses the phrase "meta-economics" by which he means two things: "one dealing with man and the other dealing with the environment. In other words, we may expect that economics must derive its aims and objectives from a study of man, and that it must derive at

²⁶ Raymond Williams, *Resources of Hope: Culture, Democracy, Socialism* (London: Verso, 1989), 4.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 4.

²⁸ Louis Fischer, *The Life of Mahatma Gandhi* (London: HarperCollins, 2010), 166.

least a large part of its methodology from a study of nature.”²⁹ An enlightened alternative to crass materialism that reduces human beings to the level of objects with the individual in pursuit of private goals is what we see in the lives of both St. Francis and Gandhi. Both are meta-economists in their love of people and respect for nature as well as mass performers living in two different periods of history and in different parts of the world and yet the goal is universal love that neither discriminates nor denounces any creature as being unworthy of boundless affection.

Such a love defies the masculine values of a patriarchal order conspicuous by its presence in medieval Europe and rooted in possession along with the conflicts it entails. The order preserves itself through deep-seated hierarchies and its ideology is oriented towards war and destruction of those who will not submit to authority. Derek Neal observes that

medieval society was not only patriarchal but hierarchical, classified by social status, wealth, and age (among other ways), and those different forms of authority reinforced each other. Masculine authority in medieval society did not follow naturally or automatically from maleness and was a matter of constant negotiation. Only some males would qualify: fathers, mature men, the heads of households, the town burgesses, the village elders... For medieval thinkers it was easy to conceive the relationship of a king to his people, or of God to humankind, in the same way: a beneficent and responsible authority, but one ultimately not to be questioned.³⁰

A “man” like St. Francis, who, with his disdain for earthly possessions would not qualify for any kind of “masculine authority,” is a misfit in this society (not to forget the fact that his first rebellion is against his own father). The love of Francis is a rejection of property and the psychology of possession based on which men occupy positions of power and privilege. In being anti-property, Franciscan love is anti-social at many levels, such as the institution of the family or of the Church itself. Aran Gurevich, the historian of the Middle Ages, argues that the Church accepted Francis in response to popular discontent with what the former stood for in practice.

Francis of Assisi rejected his inheritance and broke with his family, founding a confraternity of followers that soon became a monastic order: Faced with the people’s growing discontent at the wealth of the church, of the nobility, and of the higher levels of urban society—a discontent that bred heresy—the church found it opportune to take the mendicant friars under its protection and incorporate the movement into its official structure. It wanted them to “follow naked the naked Christ” under its aegis, not be swept along by a heretical current.³¹

²⁹ E. F. Schumacher, *Small is Beautiful: A Study of Economics as if People Mattered* (London: Sphere Books, 1977), 38.

³⁰ Margaret Schaus, ed. *Women and Gender in Medieval Europe: An Encyclopedia* (New York: Routledge, 2006), 633.

³¹ Jacques Le Goff, ed. *The Medieval World*, trans. Lydia G. Cochrane (London: Parkgate Books, 1990), 247.

Since patriarchy is in essence intertwined with inheritance through the male-dominated family, the performance of Francis strikes at the root of authoritarianism as embodied in the image of the father or father-figure.

Gelber notes that “there emerges from Francis’s own writings and from the legends that recount the details of his life a picture of Francis taking on himself a maternal or fraternal role, but not that of a father.”³² By internalizing the feminine through a performance of the maternal role, Francis shows that manhood is a construction more than anything else. To Francis, the maternal form is about loving the world as if it were one’s own child. Francis performs this aspect in how he relates to members of his order. In so doing, he also renounces his masculine, sexual self. While the maternal and the fraternal are both metaphors of asexual love or a love without the component of physical desire, the maternal is more about giving while the fraternal is about sharing. Both however are an antithesis to the role of the dominant father. This feminized language is not something unique to Francis; Caroline Walker Bynum views the rise in maternal metaphors as part of two trends in the Twelfth century: “the rise of affective spirituality and the feminization of religious language.”³³ In “The Theme of ‘Mother Jesus’ as a Reflection of Affective Spirituality,” Bynum notes:

Several of the scholars who have noticed the use of maternal imagery in medieval authors... have associated this particular image with the rise, from the eleventh century on, of a lyrical, emotional piety that focuses increasingly on the humanity of Christ. Descriptions of God as a woman nursing the soul at her breasts, drying its tears, punishing its mischief-making, giving birth to it in agony and travail are part of a growing tendency to speak of the divine in homey images and to emphasize its approachability.³⁴

Saint Francis might have been playing on a convention in his use of the language but it does not alter the fact that he lives this rejection of manhood consciously and with unparalleled intensity. If manhood is a psychological notion rather than a physical reality it follows that it is something as much internalized as is the passivity thrust on women in a patriarchal order. Therefore it makes sense to know that, “He rejected paternal identity altogether.”³⁵ In thus *becoming* the mother to the brothers in his order, Francis breaks the mental barriers that ideologically attach men to a false sense of power. Universal love is a response to the violence of patriarchy as reflected in war—its worst manifestation, that Francis had an opportunity to witness in Egypt where one of the crusades was being fought. Francis understood the gospels as radical, transhistorical performances that could change the way we perceive humanity and organize our lives together. The economics of renunciation is not just limited to saying ‘no’ to property, but also a giving up of the self attached to external things. The

³² Gelber, 22.

³³ Caroline Walker Bynum, *Jesus as Mother: Studies in the Spirituality of the High Middle Ages* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984), 129.

³⁴ *Ibid.*

³⁵ Gelber, 23.

anti-social element in Francis is what makes him an anarchist because he cannot accept order, just about any order, because all order emerges from possession or a sense of possession. The destruction of property is a destruction of the social order and men and women will henceforth live like the ravens of the air that neither “sow nor reap” and the lilies of the field that neither “toil nor spin.”

However poetic, in terms of “spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings” the romanticized Francis might seem to the modern reader, we are speaking of a mindset deeply rooted in the medieval political economy. Some of the most important decisions Francis made in his life are not arbitrarily inspired moves but are based on a consciously felt and rationalized rejection of wealth, power and status. His rationalization in embracing a life of poverty is based on his insight into the beginnings of capitalist economic order and large-scale commerce, especially in Italy. Pirenne notes that, “Scant as they are, medieval sources place the existence of capitalism in the twelfth century beyond a doubt.”³⁶ In *A Financial History of Western Europe*, Kindleberger observes that “Italians were the first European bankers, as money-changers, dealers in bills of exchange at fairs and in distant trade, and lenders to kings, nobles and the Church. In particular, they transmitted money from place to place.”³⁷ Being a wealthy merchant’s son and perhaps destined to follow his father’s footsteps, it is impossible that Francis was not aware of the “two great commercial movements” on the borders of Continental Europe, “the one in the Western Mediterranean and the Adriatic, the other in the Baltic and the North Sea.”³⁸ The young Francis ready to throw away worldly goods is not particularly different in his attitude to money from the early Marx of *Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844* and is particularly stringent in his attack on “The Power of Money in Bourgeois Society.” It is not hard to imagine Saint Francis empathizing with a statement like this from Marx, condemning money:

Being the external, common *medium* and *faculty* for turning an *image* into *reality* and *reality* into a mere *image* (a faculty not springing from man as man or from human society as society), money transforms the *real essential powers of man and nature* into what are merely abstract notions and therefore *imperfections* and tormenting chimeras, just as it transforms *real imperfections and chimeras* – essential powers which are really impotent, which exist only in the imagination of the individual – into *real powers and faculties*.³⁹

My point though is that the idealism is the result of a theoretical framework within which Francis conceives an alternative to bourgeois society in the same sense that would apply to Marx. The alternative of living a life in poverty and dedicated to otherworldly goals might not seem appealing from a Marxist perspective. This does not alter its radical agenda of challenging commercial capitalism. If the Church had indeed

³⁶ Henri Pirenne, *Economic and Social History of Medieval Europe* (New York: Harcourt, Brace and Co., 1937), 161.

³⁷ Charles P. Kindleberger, *A Financial History of Western Europe* (London: Allen and Unwin, 1984), 17.

³⁸ Pirenne, 25.

³⁹ Robert C. Tucker, ed. *The Marx-Engels Reader*. (New York: W. W. Norton & Co, 1978), 105.

adopted the worldview of Saint Francis, the history of Western Europe would have been different from the bloody one that resulted in the wholesale embrace of a commercial worldview that led to countless wars and persecutions. The economic slant in Francis embracing poverty must be understood when we think of the world of finance that works in terms of “credit” and “interest,” everything left to the forces of the market and the power of those who can manipulate the banking system to suit their greed for profits, irrespective of the human costs involved in maintaining an unequal society. It might seem simplistic to suggest that Francis is doing in the Middle Ages what Marx advocates in the 19th century. What is not simplistic, though, is the fact that Francis has revolutionary aspirations in overturning the basis of capitalism that is not different from attempts made at the turn of the 20th century. Pirenne makes the following observations about how the financial world operated in the European Middle Ages.

Commercial credit employed only a part of the liquid capital available. By far the greater part was used for loans to public authorities or to individuals. The banking operations of the Middle Ages were essentially loan operations, and almost the whole history of the trade in money at this period is concerned with these. This trade was itself a result of the commercial revival of the eleventh and twelfth centuries...It may be observed, moreover, that banking was never entirely divorced from trade in merchandise, upon which it was, so to speak, grafted. It was simply one way of utilizing reserves of capital.⁴⁰

The fact that banking and trade went together makes sense in a less specialized time period in the economic history of Western Europe. Pirenne notes that, “As a general rule the medieval banker was both money lender and merchant. The foundation of great commercial fortunes in the course of the twelfth century inevitably drew the attention of kings, princes, aristocracy and even of the church. They were all suffering from an insufficiency of revenue...”⁴¹ The basis of commercialization is where an external medium called money becomes a power unto itself and whoever possesses it in some sense owns that power. More and more it is dissociated from the human person as person and human society as society as Marx views it. The rebellion of Saint Francis is against the external agency of money and the system that embodies it. In the *Testament* that Francis dictated to the end of his life, apart from obedience, prayer and humility, he spoke to others of poverty, and that “they were to abandon all possessions and accept no permanent houses or churches.”⁴² This abandoning of houses and possessions is a way of rejecting the psychological basis or the desires on which consumerist societies are formed. Francis challenges the logic of consumption itself and the social order that stands on the morbid need to possess things we don’t always need. Pirenne speaks of the changes in ways of life leaning towards consumption that became apparent in the Middle Ages owing to the gradual rise in money-based econ-

⁴⁰ Pirenne, 125.

⁴¹ Ibid., 125.

⁴² House, 281.

omy.

The stock of money in circulation was infinitely more considerable in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries than it had been from the ninth to the end of the tenth century, and the result was a rise in prices which, naturally, turned everywhere to the advantage of the producers. Now this rise in prices went hand in hand with a way of life whose demands became more costly. In every direction where commerce spread, it created the desire for the new articles of consumption which it brought with it.⁴³

Kindleberger makes an interesting distinction between money as a private and a public good while also calling money a language.

Money in exchange is a private good, although efficient use of money in effecting payments, and availability of money to households and firms have the public-good quality of assisting efficient operation of markets for goods and services. A private good is one consumption of which by one person or firm precludes use by others. A public good, on the contrary, is defined as something that can be used by any economic actor without subtracting from amounts available to others. As a public good, money has been compared with language that assists in national and international intercourse. Italian was the commercial language of the Mediterranean in the late Middle Ages and Renaissance.⁴⁴

Francis is not only rejecting what money can buy at a personal level but also what money stands for in terms of a “public good.” If Italian was indeed “the commercial language of the Mediterranean,” what Francis is doing is to free the language of its commercial character by replacing the role of money with that of poverty. In doing so Francis may not have been without the support of the Roman Catholic Church, which also was against the notion of “interest.” Pirenne writes:

From the beginning to the end the Church continued to regard commercial profits as dangerous to salvation. Its ascetic ideal, which was perfectly suited to an agricultural civilization, made it always suspicious of social changes, which it could not prevent and to which necessity even compelled it to submit, but to which it was never openly reconciled. Its prohibition of interest was to weigh heavily on the economic life of later centuries.⁴⁵

The Franciscan performance of a life of poverty is not just about disregarding commercial profits but is a complete renunciation of money itself. At the end of the day the Catholic Church is an institution like any other religious order, and is maintained through the contributions of believers. If the Church were to take Francis seriously, it would have to give up the social and political power it had acquired through the centuries and reduce the buildings to open spaces. It would have to become one with the mass of believers rather than a powerful elite whose function is to control the masses. This does not mean that the forbidding of usury by the Church had no

⁴³ Pirenne, 79.

⁴⁴ Kindleberger, 20.

⁴⁵ Pirenne, 28.

influence on Francis except that he goes far beyond the modest expectations of the Church. Kindleberger provides a context to it when he says:

The usury laws of the Church did not so much cut down the amount of lending and borrowing as complicate them by the necessity to disguise the state of affairs. The basis for the prohibition against charging interest is found in the ethical prescription in a primitive society, close to the subsistence level, against taking advantage of the misfortunes of others. When a crop fails and a family goes hungry, brotherhood exacts a charitable response, not an exploitive one. As capital starts to become productive, however, there is no ethical requirement for the owner to share its fruit and to lend to others for their positive advantage. Moreover, investments for profit do not require a communal relationship between lender and borrower.⁴⁶

There is little doubt that Francis, in the way he founded the order and attempted to maintain it, followed all the ethical prescriptions that we see in a primitive society. He might have wanted to inject the spirit of brotherly love and trust that we see in smaller groups operating at a subsistence level into the Middle Ages. His reaction to commercialization is an odd and eccentric one to say the least. What however Francis must be credited with is that, only in poverty and among the very poor, he could see the possibility of a love that rejects all possessions. He sees in poverty not only an answer to meaningless consumption but also a test of one's real humanity. There is no other way of knowing who you are or for you to discover your spiritual self except through rejecting a life built around objects. The poverty of Francis is about performing such a love. In his *The History of Western Philosophy*, Bertrand Russell claims that Saint Francis "was one of the most lovable men known to history."⁴⁷ This loveliness of Saint Francis, for which he is most remembered, comes from the fact that "His goodness appears always devoid of effort, as though it had no dross to overcome."⁴⁸

In his role as an actor of divine proportions, Saint Francis perfected the performance in which there is no effort to be made in loving and one could love anything and everything if you looked at nature and the universe through the eyes of one in love for the joy of being in love. By way of the many stories connected to his life, on the way to retreat at La Verna "Francis sat for a time under a great oak to see if the birds would welcome his arrival; when each in turn came to sing above his head he was delighted."⁴⁹ In fact, such is the spontaneity and lack of limits in his performance of universal love that "Gregory IX, who was a personal friend of Saint Francis, continued to favour him, while imposing certain rules which were irksome to the saint's enthusiastic and anarchic impulses."⁵⁰ What makes Francis a mass performer is precisely the "enthusiastic and anarchic impulses." Because order was alien to his nature and his philosophy of life, Francis was bound by nothing that would remotely catego-

⁴⁶ Kindleberger, 41.

⁴⁷ Bertrand Russell, *A History of Western Philosophy* (London: Allen & Unwin, 1961), 449.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 450.

⁴⁹ House, 256.

⁵⁰ Russell, *A History*, 449.

alize him with one set of qualities as opposed to another. His love has an element of madness that Plato associates with the muses in *Phaedrus* when Socrates argues, “It [the madness] takes hold of a delicate, virgin soul and stirs it into a frenzy for composing lyric and other kinds of poetry.”⁵¹ In the case of Francis, the madness of the poem can be viewed in his life itself. Steven Runciman notes the attempts made by Francis to bring peace between Christians and Moslems while in Egypt during the Fifth Crusade, which, though might seem politically “unwise” from a historian’s perspective, is viewed differently by the Moslem soldiers who came across Francis.

The battle had been watched with a sad dismay by a distinguished visitor to the camp, Brother Francis of Assisi. He had come to the East believing, as many other good and unwise persons before and after him have believed, that a peace-mission can bring about peace. He now asked permission of Pelagius to go to see the Sultan. After some hesitation Pelagius agreed, and sent him under a flag of truce to Fariskur. *The Moslem guards were suspicious at first but soon decided that anyone so simple, so gentle and so dirty must be mad, and treated him with the respect due to a man who had been touched by God.* He was taken to the Sultan al-Kamil who was charmed by him and listened patiently to his appeal, but who was too kind and too highly civilized to allow him to give witness to his faith in an ordeal by fire.⁵² [emphasis added]

The “gentleness” and the “madness” went together in how his contemporaries viewed Francis, not to mention that they sometimes happened to be the so-called enemies of the Christians. House points out that “In the last years of his life Francis fought desperately to convince his brothers that after money and buildings, learning could prove the most dangerous handicap in their pursuit of salvation.”⁵³ To the universal love of Saint Francis only the physical universe poses a limit. Through his astounding one-person show, Saint Francis not only disrupts stereotypes of class, gender and nation, but he also deconstructs the nature-culture dichotomy. The mass performance that Francis enacted with singular passion makes one wonder if the epithet “Dark Ages” attached to Medieval Europe is not in fact a misnomer.



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⁵¹ Plato, *Phaedrus*, trans. Robin Waterfield (Oxford: OUP, 2002), 27.

⁵² Steven Runciman, *A History of the Crusades: Volume iii The Kingdom of Acre and the Later Crusades*, (Cambridge: CUP, 1995), 159-160.

⁵³ House, 237.