

THE NEED FOR A THEOLOGY OF INSTITUTIONS¹

ROBERT K. GREENLEAF

I believe that caring for persons, the more able and the less able serving each other, is what makes a good society. Most caring was once person-to-person. Now much of it is mediated through institutions that are often impersonal, incompetent, even corrupt. If a better society is to be built, one more just and loving and providing opportunity for people to grow, then the most effective and economical way, while being supportive of the social order, is to raise the performance-as-servant of all institutions by voluntary and regenerative forces initiated within the institutions by committed individuals.

It is realistic to expect that enough of these committed people exist, potentially, to raise the quality of the common life substantially. But if this potential is to be realized, positive steps must be taken to favor the emergence and preparation of these people, followed by sustaining support for action they may initiate within institutional structures.

I speak with some feeling on this point because I realize now, in retirement, that in my career I had the opportunity and the motive to take such an initiating, institution-building role; but the preparation and sustaining support were lacking. To remedy this lack in the future, one step the churches may take is to evolve a contemporary “theology of institutions.” With the guidance of that theology, the churches may become a vital new society-building influence.

I do not believe that the urgently needed fundamental reconstruction of our vast and pervasive structure of institutions can take place, prudently and effectively, without a strong supporting influence from the churches. And I doubt that churches as they now stand, with only a theology of persons to guide them, can wield the needed influence. I deem it imperative that a new and compelling theology of institutions come into being. It is my hope that contemporary churches will take the lead to produce it. Our times are crying out for such leadership.

In the back of my mind is the notion that when Karl Marx sat alone in the British Museum composing the doctrines that would shape much of the twentieth-century world, he was filling the void that resulted from the failure of the theologians of his day to deal with the consequences of the Industrial Revolution. But while Marx wrote, another revolution was in the making that he did not take note of: the shift from a society of individuals to one in which people became deeply involved in institutions.

Institutions, as we know them, are relatively new, a product of the past two hundred years. The U.S. Constitution was written before there was even a shadow of the present dominance of institutions. That document, too, is concerned only with per-

¹ Robert K. Greenleaf, *Seeker and Servant* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass Publishers, 1996). 191-198.

sons. The prevailing corporate form of organization is not mentioned in our Constitution. Corporations get their legal status from the willingness of the courts to construe them as persons. As a nation, through our legislative, policy-making process, we have not yet explicitly faced the question of what kind of institution-bound society will serve us best. We have simply improvised from our two hundred-year-old seminal thinking about a nation of persons. And one of the results, at this point, is a society that does not have a hopeful outlook.

Likewise, those who draw their spiritual sustenance from churches and are concerned for preparing people who will care and serve in our complex, tension-torn world have largely extrapolated from the available theology of persons and seem not to have explicitly faced the question of what a committed person does—one who is capable of being a strong quality building force within our institutions. As a consequence, too much of the effort to care and serve is directed to easing the hurt of the “system” that is grinding people down faster than the most valiant rescue effort can help them; and too little caring effort is going into building a “system” (institutions) that will have a positive growing effect on people.

Much of the concern for the quality of society in our times has been directed toward actions by government, with the hope of providing money to alleviate suffering, correct injustice, or use the coercive power of government to compel both people and institutions to behave in socially constructive ways. In an imperfect world, some of these measures will always be needed. But compulsion is mainly useful to restrain destructive behavior, and money is mostly helpful to cushion suffering and injustice. Neither compulsion nor money has much value as a quality-building force that will cause our institutions to be more caring or serving. How can a contemporary theology of institutions be brought into being, one that will encourage, prepare, and support committed people to make careers inside institutions as initiators of regenerative quality-building action?

In the absence of experience that marks a clear path (which, if we had it, would suggest that the work had already been done), the following steps are suggested:

1. Within a given church or church organization, identify a strong leader-type person who has had substantial experience as an operating executive of a major institution and has served as trustee or consultant to several institutions, through which experience this person (hereafter called the *leader*) has acquired a comprehensive grasp of modern institutions large and small.
2. Give the leader support and coaching, with the hope that he or she will make a major investment in leading a process that may in time bring a new theology of institutions.
3. Start conversations among professional theologians and other related professionals to identify those who have the interest to contribute to a search for the new theology.

4. Identify at least one person, possibly an articulate theologian, who has good conceptual and writing ability and wants to write for this mission.
5. Through the leader, start the search for perceptive people who have experience in various institutional settings, and try to find a few who will make a major time investment in the mission.
6. Convene, through the leader, a task force in the setting of a religious retreat. Of all the resources currently available, the retreat environment is the one most likely to encourage the richness of insight and clarity of direction that this mission will require.
7. Successive retreat sessions may be interspersed with writing and sharing ventures that may contribute to an evolving theology of institutions. There may never emerge a “conference document” to which all subscribe. Rather, there may be several documents, individually authored that get into circulation. The influential document that eventually has widespread impact may not be immediately identified, and it may not be written by any of the retreat participants. Wide ferment and testing by time and experience may be required, and in the process much may be discovered in earlier writing that is relevant. The hope is that there will be continuity of tradition from the existing theology of persons to a new contemporary theology of institutions.

Some questions are raised about these suggested steps. Why, is asked, is the existing theology of persons inadequate? It is inadequate because it deals only with *persons* relating to *persons*. To be sure, there is some of this within institutions. But within institutions people are hemmed in by intricate technologies; they are involved in elaborate hierarchies; they contend with social, political, and economic pressures; and they must deal with the many power vectors that give institutions their strength as well as make them a threat to individuals. An institution at its best is not just a housekeeping arrangement for an assortment of functions. It has the potential for synergy, for the whole to be greater than the sum of its parts, and for individuals to perform to a higher ethical standard than if they were operating wholly on their own. An institution's justification for being is the realization of these potentials. The all-too-frequent shortfall is one measure of the need for a new theology of institutions.

Further, there is the question of whether the resources of the social sciences are adequate to point the way for humane and socially constructive institutions. The social sciences make their contribution by illuminating problems and suggesting procedures, but they do not supply the faith one must have to risk and venture, which is what institution building requires. Science helps calculate the odds on a decision, but belief sustains one in the inevitable uncertainties and anxieties which the initiator of regenerative action must bear. Science deals with what is experimentally demonstrable. Theology arises from experience, meditation, and inspiration and is

made practical by ventures of faith. We have much *science* of institutions, but little *theology* of institutions.

Then there is the question of leadership: going out ahead to show the way. *Lead* is a many faceted word. But in the context of institutions it can be distinguished from *manage* and *administer*, which are more concerned with control and maintenance. Those who manage and administer are usually empowered by authority. But anyone, empowered by authority or not, can lead! Followers make the leader, by giving their trust and respect. Thus the leader, if successful, is also empowered—but not by authority. Since institutions are generally authoritarian in structure, and since they depend on authority for some of their essential functions, a theology of institutions will deal with the many issues that arise out of the parallel existence of authority and leadership and the need to have both of them—not only for institutional effectiveness and survival, but to ensure that the impact of institutions on people will be benign and constructive.

If one accepts (as assumed here) that the vast labyrinth of institutions that engulfs us all is now a major factor in determining the quality of our common life, and if one sees (as I do) the churches as an indispensable leaven for good within that labyrinth of institutions, then one of the leadership initiatives open to churches—an initiative that would give hope for greater power to fulfill their missions—would be a sustained and carefully considered effort to produce a new contemporary theology of institutions. Such a theology, and the process of producing it, will give any church that makes the effort a new window on the world—the world of institutions—that may enable it to re-form its mission toward new ends.

As I see it, the adequacy of any theology is tested ultimately by examining what it produces in the lives of people who have its implications interpreted for them through the mediation of churches. From my vantage point as a student of organization, and within my view of what church-guided people do (or fail to do) with their many opportunities to render our vast array of institutions more serving, I conclude that the available theology of institutions is far from adequate.

Anyone can make a contribution to theology. But established theologians are best positioned to originate and to advocate the much needed theology of institutions—and to be heard in so doing. However, non-theologians who are keeping a close watch on our institutions will make the ultimate judgment on the adequacy of that theology. The test these non-theologians will make is this: does that theology of institutions generate a sufficient moral imperative as a moving force in the persons of trustees and directors of institutions of all sorts—large or small, for profit or not for profit—that induces them to take, and sustain, initiatives that result in the institutions they hold in trust becoming substantially more serving than they now are to all they touch? My experience with institutions suggests that this urgently needed moral imperative is not likely to emerge among trustees and directors until a compelling logic for it has been made quite specific, and advocated persuasively and with a note of urgency, in a new theology of institutions.

In making these assertions I am not judging the adequacy of theology in general; nor am I suggesting a priority among the many facets of life with which theology deals. But I do believe that it will not be possible to raise significantly the caring quality of contemporary society unless and until our many institutions (including seminaries, churches, and church-related institutions) move much closer to the reasonable and the possible as *servants of society*. Further, it seems to me that we ought not to expect governments at any level to do much better than they are now doing until conspicuously clear examples of excellence are set by trustee-or director-governed institutions that have a measure of resources and autonomy to be what they choose to be.

There is no magic “they” who will transform our many institutions on command so as to render them more serving. From the outside, these institutions can be persuaded, cajoled, pressured, and threatened. But nothing constructive happens until individual persons who are strategically placed inside choose to initiate the transforming actions.

So far humankind has evolved in two basic ways (with a third being a combination of the two) to encourage these initiatives: through the political process of control, or through the governance of trustees who manage voluntary institutions. Both governments and trustees hold coercive power; but coercion, which is effective in stopping or destroying something, is of little value in inducing the actions that create truly serving institutions. Fortunately for the healing of world society, only persuasion will do that in a durable way. It is the opportunity of the churches to understand, advocate, and implement persuasion.

The first step in spreading a new theology of institutions for these times may be to learn how to communicate through the churches to all they can reach who hold governmental power or who are trustees or directors of any kind of institution, so as to:

- Instill in them a moral imperative to persuade their colleagues of the need to raise the service quality of the institution they control or hold in trust so that the reasonable and possible are achieved in service to all who are touched by its actions.
- Give support and encouragement with preparatory facilities to help them find prudent ways to accomplish institutional transformation through persuasion.
- Help them sustain openness and strength to persevere. It may be a long struggle, requiring patience, insight, fortitude, and faith.

There are many paths to a more serving society, and the regeneration of our many institutions is but one of them. But without a theology of institutions that is clear

and compelling, the contribution of churches to the quality of the common life will be limited. The movement I hope to see is when all institutions will become more serving of all persons they touch, to the end that those being served will grow as persons: while being served they will become healthier, wiser, freer, more autonomous, more likely themselves to become servants.