

1

The Formative Early History of Seeing Things Whole and Its Guiding Core Assumptions

DICK BROHOLM

W

HAT FOLLOWS IS AN ADAPTATION of an early “Think Piece” written by David and me to stimulate a conversation among STW colleagues about some of the origins of this work, its early history and its guiding assumptions. It was written as a fictional dialogue between us and our colleagues in the work, but in many ways reflects the deep conversations that were and are still taking place. In that sense it may capture some of the questions or comments you would choose to currently make. I offer it to our symposium as a way of stimulating our inquiry and conversation during these days together. The first part focusing primarily on the history of the model is included in this paper. The second part dealing with some of the theological and Christological implications is in the paper to be discussed on Wednesday morning titled, **Some Musings About Christology and Organizations.**

SESSION I: AN INTRODUCTION TO THE SEEING THINGS WHOLE MODEL

In the dialogue, for shorthand purposes, I will be designated as DB and all of my colleagues will be designated by a common voice, COLleagues.

COL: You know, basically I am excited to be a part of this effort and am challenged to think in new ways about my faith and how it connects to my organization. But I also need to admit that I have a ton of questions and there are times when I wonder if we haven't walked through a door that leads no where.

DB: My hunch is that most of us could, at times, echo those same sentiments. That's why I've invited you all here. I would hope that we could be completely honest with each other about both our affirmations and our doubts regarding this effort to build or uncover a theology of institutions. I believe this will be helpful no matter where it leads. At the very least, we should be able to identify and uncover those assumptions that presently shape this work. Hopefully that will also help us lay the groundwork for the future. So where do we begin?

COL: Since I wasn't a part of this effort early on, it would help me understand what were the motivating influences which got you started in the first place? Why did you feel it was important?

DB: Well, for me, this effort to reflect theologically about institutions has taken shape within the broader context of a lifetime of involvement in the movement to recover the Reformation conviction that all of us—not just ordained clergy—are called to be servants, ministers of Jesus Christ. The first intimations of a need for a theology of institutions, however, came during my years with Metropolitan Associates (MAP) of Philadelphia. It was during the tension-filled 1960's that MAP was launched as an action-research project by several denominations. Our stated purpose "was to engage in missionary action for the sake of a common witness to and participation in Christ's work of renewal in the city".

MAP was one of a handful of experimental projects spawned by the World Council of Church's study on the "Missionary Structure of the Congregation". It was an attempt to respond to the need for a fresh understanding of the meaning of biblical faith in a world

SESSION I: AN INTRODUCTION TO THE SEEING THINGS WHOLE MODEL

dominated by large institutions. I can recall, Jitsuo Morikawa, our founder and first director, saying again and again *“Our job is not to jump on this hot issue or that. We are an action-research project for the church, to help illumine, provoke and summon the institutions of the city to their calling. We are here to try and discover a form of public ministry in the business, governmental and social organizations of this city.”*

COL: Sounds simple enough. How did you decide to tackle it?

DB: The way Jitsuo framed the problem meant that we were forced to deal with the meaning of lay witness and ministry in a radically different way than we ever had before. He pushed us to think about ministry and mission not only in individual but in institutional terms. Long before most church leaders, Jitsuo recognized that life was increasingly being formed and shaped by the organizations in which people worked and expended much of their life energy. He said that these organizations are the hands and fingers by which people’s lives are either enriched and nurtured or diminished and destroyed. He believed that the Biblical mandate to “love our neighbor” was often most profoundly experienced or denied by the way people of faith serve in leadership roles within organizations. Though he didn’t speak about the need for a theology of institutions in those days, Jitsuo, intuitively knew that the church needed to find a way to address these “powers and principalities” and call them to faithfulness.

COL: This may feel like a diversion, but when you talk about “powers and principalities” and use that phrase to describe institutions, I’m reminded of Paul’s letters and his understanding of the interconnectedness of the natural world and the way in which Christ relates to the whole of creation.

DB: It’s not a diversion at all. Jitsuo drew heavily on Paul’s way of thinking about God’s reconciling activity. One of his favorite passages was in the letter to the Colossians where Paul wrote:

“He is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation; for in him all things in heaven and on earth were created, things visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or rulers or powers—all things have been created through him and for him. He

SESSION I: AN INTRODUCTION TO THE SEEING THINGS WHOLE MODEL

himself is before all things and in him all things hold together. He is the beginning, the firstborn from the dead, so that he might come to have first place in everything. For in him all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell, and through him God was pleased to reconcile to himself all things, whether on earth or in heaven, by making peace through the blood of his cross.”

(Colossians 1:15-20)

COL: That really is a powerful assertion. It shatters the common assumption that the Christian story and the good news of the Gospel is only concerned with the redemption and reconciliation of individuals! Paul presses us toward a much broader understanding of God's ongoing interest in the created order which, for me, includes organizations. Walter Wink picks up on this Biblical truth in his own study on the "powers" when he says, *"The Powers are created. The Powers are fallen. The Powers will be redeemed."* But go ahead. What happened at MAP? I'd like to have you return to the MAP history and tell us what happened. Did you develop a theology of institutions?

DB: No. In fact, as I indicated, to the best of my memory we didn't even use the term back then. Our attention was focused on the question of institutional change and how groups of people could bring it about. Our hard experience told us that individuals, working alone and in isolation, rarely produced any lasting change. So we experimented with support groups or "change agent teams", as we called them. A lot of our energy was poured into developing processes for group envisioning and strategizing which utilized the kind of wisdom and insight that can come from drawing on diverse perspectives around a common vision.

COL: Can you be more specific?

DB: These were tumultuous years in which traditional authority and conventional wisdom was being challenged, so we were drawn to group processes and leadership theory that sought to build on the insights and wisdom that is often stifled by hierarchical leadership. For example, George Bauer, who was then a senior staff person at IBM, introduced us to Strategic Planning which recognized the importance of identifying underlying value, operational and environmental assumptions that had been largely ignored in traditional Long Range Planning. Our whole staff was trained in Syntectics, an approach to creative group

SESSION I: AN INTRODUCTION TO THE SEEING THINGS WHOLE MODEL

problem-solving which, among other things, re-defined the role of group leadership, separating the functions of process facilitation from that of problem ownership . We utilized the social change theory and practice of Paulo Friere's work with South America's marginalized called "consciencization" and combined that with the theory of the Dutch historian, Fred Polak on the role of vision in transforming societies. Integrating this theory and these methods we developed a small group change agent process we called Strategic Decision Making.

COL: I want to make sure I don't lose the thread here. Say a bit more about the relevance of this effort at MAP for our present work on a theology of institutions.

DB: The reflection model we are currently using had its origins in the group process originally designed in MAP. In addition to these process resources, the MAP staff also did some ground-breaking work on identifying institutional values. This work around values turned out to be very important several years later when, at Andover Newton, we began to explore the model of the three-fold office of Christ as a window to theologically reflect on "secular" organizations. But I'm getting ahead of myself.

Perhaps, most important of all, we found ourselves stretching to think about institutions and their role in society in a way most of us had not done before. If you'll recall the temper of the late 1960's and early 70's, institutions were under attack for all their inadequacies and destructive policies. It was hard for persons of faith who were leaders in these institutions to feel at all comfortable with their role. You may remember that during that time John Gardner insightfully observed that institutions were being trapped between unloving critics on the outside and uncritical lovers within. His plea was for the development and support of loving critics and critical lovers — people who could clearly see the institution's failures but also their potential; leaders who were willing to risk and invest themselves in enabling our institutions to truly serve society.

Another reason we had to think about institutions in new ways had to do with the mix of people who were part of MAP's work. MAP was made up of a vast cross-section of persons giving leadership in a variety of organizations around Philadelphia; many of which were in conflict with each other. For example, the MAP community included a Vice President of a chemical company and the union organizer who picketed it or the

SESSION I: AN INTRODUCTION TO THE SEEING THINGS WHOLE MODEL

representative from the Mayor's office and the Black Power community organization angry about city policy. We found ourselves having to listen to each other and reflect theologically in genuinely new ways. Those of us with seminary training had not really been prepared for this kind of conversation. We were, to borrow a phrase from Bob Greenleaf, being compelled to strain to "see things whole." This effort to see things whole challenged us to regard and understand institutions and systems of institutions in all their complexity. Even more of a stretch in some ways was the effort to embrace the inevitable tensions which we discovered between conflicting "goods" not so much as a problems but rather as an opportunity for faithfulness.

I don't think I really understood the significance of that effort back then.

COL: What happened to MAP? Is it still in existence?

DB: No. It went the way of many 60's programs. When denominations found their funds drying up because of their social activism and the consequent reaction of many conservative church members, budgets were cut dramatically. Aware that our time was running short the staff, now reduced to 5, spent a marathon weekend exploring the question: "How can this work be sustained when MAP is no longer around to support it?" We examined several possible strategies including business schools and consulting firms and finally made a "wager" on the local congregation believing that it was the logical place to nurture and support men and women as leaders of organizational change. In the waning days of MAP the staff focused its energy on creating a resource, **The Strategy of Hope** to help raise the consciousness of pastors and laity. The hoped for audience, with rare exceptions did not develop and MAP closed its doors in 1974 with its work essentially unfinished. The staff scattered. I went into consulting and eventually came to the Boston office of an international management consulting firm.

COL: What drew you back to this work?

DB: My time with Hay Associates was incredibly helpful and formative in shaping my thinking about organizations. But after a few years I felt called to once again pick up my vocation around the ministry of the laity. So I returned to my alma mater, Andover Newton,

SESSION I: AN INTRODUCTION TO THE SEEING THINGS WHOLE MODEL

for a year of graduate study to reflect on the MAP experience and what it might have to say about any future endeavor. One thing led to another. With the encouragement of Gabe Fackre, a remarkable theologian who knew of the work of MAP, I launched a five year action-research project involving six congregations to explore what the Church might do differently if it really was committed to the full ministry of the whole people of God. That research, among other things, revealed once again to me how little attention the Church had spent on trying to understand and illumine the content of lay people's workplace ministries.

COL: What did that research reveal?

DB: The fruits of this research led to the discovery of nine critical factors in congregational life which either impeded or supported the congregation becoming a community of support for members' workplace ministries. These findings were compiled in a report "Empowering the Laity for Their Full Ministry" which was distributed widely among several denominations but then lay fallow for over 15 years until Jack Fortin and the folk at Luther Seminary picked it up and used it as a formative influence in their Centered Life initiative.

COL: This focus on congregations is interesting, and potentially important in the long term to creating a wide ranging set of supportive environments for organizational leaders, but how does this connect to the development of "a theology of institutions"?

DB: In the larger vision of an empowering church, it all does fit together but back then it wasn't so clear. A number of factors, however, came together over the next couple of years which launched us into the work on a theology of institutions. George Peck became President of Andover Newton. George was also a gifted theologian who, through personal experience, came to be a strong advocate for the ministry of the laity in the workplace and the importance of providing a theological foundation. Dave Specht joined the staff of the Center and thus began a collaboration in research and resource development that established the basis for the work to develop a theology of institution and, of course, has sustained and grown this work over the last twenty years. The triggering event was George Bauer who had been involved in this effort going back to its very earliest phases in Madison at the University of Wisconsin. Now 25 years later he proposed the funding of a small study to

SESSION I: AN INTRODUCTION TO THE SEEING THINGS WHOLE MODEL

examine the specific role of economic institutions in American society and what theology might have to say to them. If you recall the early 80's it was the time when Reagan economics dominated the landscape, on one hand, and liberation theology was making a biting critique of economic institutions, on the other. George, believed that a group of theologians, ethicists, economists and business leaders, reflecting together, might be able to shed some light on this very heated debate.

COL: That sounds as if it could have been a promising dialogue. What happened?

DB: The group met for a year. Over that time several insights emerged which have informed our subsequent effort to develop a theology of institutions:

1. Not surprisingly, we found that the conversation between economists, theologians and business practitioners was difficult. Not only because we shared different assumptions, but also because there was no common language that made communication easy. Each group preferred the dialogue to proceed on ground that was comfortable and familiar to them. And though all were persons of faith, the language of faith—theology—did not provide that ground either.
2. Though it was not a startlingly new thought, our conversations reinforced the conviction that economic institutions exist in an ecology of institutions in which each institution has a unique mission but is dependent upon other institutions for how that mission is exercised. Further, George spoke about the “envelope reality”. He described how no organization exists in a vacuum. Every organization lives in and is bounded by a series of “envelopes” which set boundaries and exercise constraints on what the organizations can and cannot do. For economic institutions some of their significant “envelopes” are government agencies and their regulatory policies. This institutional inter-dependence is tension-filled but absolutely essential for a healthy society and productive institutions.
3. Related to this and perhaps, the most important insight to emerge was the acknowledgment, particularly by the practitioners, that “bottom-line thinking” (eg. the

SESSION I: AN INTRODUCTION TO THE SEEING THINGS WHOLE MODEL

idea that one value in an organization is more important than any other and, therefore, ultimately holds preeminence over all others) is archaic. For decades profit or economic viability had been seen as the ultimate bottom-line value. More recently some have suggested that the “bottom-line” is really customer service or the well-being and morale of the workforce. But in every case the assumption was that ultimately one value or purpose needed to prevail over all others, thus “the bottom-line”.

To challenge this assumption, one of the members of the group shared an article from Harvard Business Review by Douglas Sherwin, the former President of Phillips Products Company. In the article, “The Ethical Roots of the Business System” Sherwin said that business is a system of interdependent members that can thrive only when all its members are given **equal** emphasis. To act ethically a manager has to ensure that the owners, employees, and customers and the legitimate values they represent all share in the business’s gain. *“What each member receives is constrained by what other members require, and no member can, in the long run, enjoy a disproportionate share. Beside being interdependent, the members of the system are entirely equal in importance. Business people often claim primacy for capital, perceiving it as the fuel of the enterprise, while consumers tend to assume that the whole point of the business is to provide them with goods and services. But no member of a system can be primary. Since the contribution of every member is necessary and no contribution is sufficient, all members are equal.”*

COL: Echoes of Paul’s description of the body of Christ!

DB: Yes, one of the members of our group was quick to see that as well and he even went on to suggest that the metaphor of Christ’s body might also apply to so-called “secular” institutions as well as the church .

COL: Is that what led you to undertake the work on a theology of institutions using the model of the threefold office of Christ?

DB: In hindsight, I would identify it as a clear but probably unconscious influence. But there were several other, more tangible factors, as well. Bob Lynn, who was then Vice President for Religion of the Lilly Endowment, asked me if I would assume the administrative responsibility for what came to be known as the Robert. Greenleaf Center. It was assumed

SESSION I: AN INTRODUCTION TO THE SEEING THINGS WHOLE MODEL

that this task would not take much time and I could continue as the Executive Director of the Center for the Ministry of the Laity.

This assignment brought me into direct and frequent conversation with Robert Greenleaf. Bob Greenleaf, unlike Jitsuo Morikawa, was not a churchman. He had no formal theological training and probably would not have called himself a “Christian believer”. But through his lifetime of management research at AT&T and then subsequently on his retirement from that corporation to work as a consultant with universities, foundations, corporations and church institutions he gradually came to the conviction that *“a theology of institutions could be a critical resource in the development, preparation and sustenance of persons who were committed to being regenerative agents within institutions”*.

He began to press us at the Center to undertake the effort to create a theology of institutions. He wrote in one letter *“So long as churches have only a theology of persons they cannot wield the needed influence on institutions and their leaders.”* He suggested that the church’s theological preoccupation with individuals tends to focus people’s thinking on *“how to ease the hurt of the system, and not on how to build a system that can have a positive, growing, liberating, humanizing impact on people.”*

Simultaneously with Bob’s influence, Jitsuo also began to press us at the Center and the seminary to address this gap in the church’s theological thinking. He wrote in one letter *“If humankind is called to affect history and the reshaping of the world, then men and women in the business, political, social, health educational and physical planning institutions must see themselves under the mandate of calling. This means that every institution is confronted with the pressing question, ‘To what end?’ To what purpose do we produce chemicals, educate children, build highways, elect officials, administer medicine, and provide social services? The church has commendably focused its theological discipline upon the welfare of individual persons...Therefore the ministry of the church is concerned and practiced as largely ministry to persons. But today, more than in the past, the fate or welfare of human life is powerfully affected by the institutions of society; in fact, the future is being largely shaped by these economic, political and social institutions of our culture, so that the role of institutions, the moral and social accountability of institutions, becomes perhaps the number one agenda in our historical enterprise. How to confront these powerful organizations, which are our greatest achievement, before they destroy us, on the one hand, and how to evoke and provoke them to a fresh discovery and discernment of their true purpose and calling, on the other hand, is the task of an American, indigenous, evocative theology.”*

SESSION I: AN INTRODUCTION TO THE SEEING THINGS WHOLE MODEL

COL: That's a pretty specific mandate. How could anyone resist the suggestive powers of two such persuasive men!

DB: (Laughing) You're right, but the final nudge was Bob Lynn's decision to provide the Center with a small grant from the Lilly foundation to formally undertake this work.

COL: So how did you decide to go about it?

DB: We formed two task forces, both made up of a mixture of seminary faculty and organizational leaders from a variety of types of institutions. One task force focused directly on the development of a theology of institutions, the other was designed to work on a model for theological reflection in the workplace. The two efforts became closely interrelated and both have profoundly influenced the work we are doing now.

COL: That's a fascinating history and I can see more clearly now the origin of some of the assumptions which under-gird this work. What I'm not clear about is how you came to chose a relatively obscure theological concept like the threefold office of Christ as the point of departure? That theological tradition does not, in my experience, seem to connect easily with the faith-world of most lay people.

DB: As I indicated in talking about some of the insights that emerged from the original task force on economic institutions, religious language is problematic. We are faced with a real dilemma when we attempt to bridge the gap between the world of theology and the "secular" workplace. Which language system do you utilize to even begin the dialogue knowing full well that it puts those who are unfamiliar with it at a decided disadvantage. The choice also tends to construct a way of viewing reality which may completely misfire and not provide any real insight or illumination, after all.

COL: Clearly that's a risk we always have to take, but there are probably some ways we can guard against the more obvious pitfalls. Since you were attempting to create a theology of institutions, I can understand why the effort might need to begin using the language of theology. It doesn't explain, however, why you elected to focus on the three-fold office.

SESSION I: AN INTRODUCTION TO THE SEEING THINGS WHOLE MODEL

DB: Let me pick up on that history and what we found in Wednesday morning's discussion on Christology and Our Understanding of Organizations.

COL: That's fine by me.

To be continued: