

6

Four Premises Shaping A Theology of Institutions

DAVID SPECHT

If humankind is called to affect history and the reshaping of the world, then men and women in business, political, social, health, educational and physical planning institutions must see themselves under the mandate of calling; a calling to corporate responsibility. 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?'

Jitsuo Morikawa

*If you wish for God, hold fast to the world!*ⁱⁱ

Dietrich Bonhoeffer

Two Questions

How might we theologically understand the nature and purpose of organizations? And what might the practical implications of a theological understanding of organizations be for those responsible for leading these institutions on a day-to-day basis? These very questions about the relationship of faith and organizational life speak to (and grow out of) a hunger expressed by a growing number of men and women who serve in roles of

SESSION III: CONSIDERING A THEORY OF ORGANIZATIONS

organizational leadership or trusteeship. Their yearning is for an experience of deeper alignment between their religious and ethical convictions and what their workplace organizations demand of them. As the COO of one organization put it, “I’d like my wife and kids to feel proud of the things I do and decisions I make at work. Most of the time, I think they would be, but I fear there are other times when this would be a stretch.”

This essay proposes four ideas – theological premises – which have emerged from a ten-year effort to develop a practical and applied theology of institutionsⁱⁱⁱ – the fruit of standing under these questions and their relentless invitation to commingle our sacred ideals with the complex and highly pressurized worlds of our organizations.^{iv}

Our approach to developing a theology of institutions has been informed by a simple conviction and a difficult problem. Our conviction was that any genuinely useful theological perspective on organizations would necessarily emerge from the collaborative engagement between those whose center of gravity is primarily within the religious tradition (in our tradition, mostly seminary faculty and church leaders) and those who spend the great majority of their time preoccupied with the life and performance of the organizations where they work. We believe that an adequate theology of institutions can emerge only from an exploration which engages both of these worlds – the theological tradition and the world of organizations - with genuine care and respect.

The difficult problem was to pull this off. Too often, in engaging the world of secular institutions, the church in North America either blandly and uncritically affirms organizations and their leadership or, on the other hand, errs in the opposite direction by regarding institutions with an indiscriminately critical and unforgiving eye. These unfortunate alternatives reflect a broader societal tendency noted by John Gardner when he wrote about institutions being trapped between those persons (often on the inside) who are complacent and unwilling to see the institution change, and those prophets (usually on the outside) who insist that the institution must change or else they will tear it down. Gardner described this as the battle between "the uncritical lovers" and the "unloving critics" suggesting that "love without criticism brings stagnation, but criticism without love brings destruction."^v

We were convinced, then, that in order to develop a theology of institutions capable of undergirding commitment of people of faith to hold institutions in trust, it must emerge from a conversation in which organizational leaders experience their complex worlds and the consequential decisions they face in these settings being held in trust through a dialogue marked *both* by respect and rigorous engagement.

SESSION III: CONSIDERING A THEORY OF ORGANIZATIONS

We were also clear that an essential test of the adequacy of any theology of institutions which emerged from this engagement would be *the extent to which it offered a basis for the development and support of "loving critics" capable of holding institutions in trust.* The work of holding an institution in trust demands that one brings a larger sense of one's role and purpose in the world and, similarly, a larger vision for the role and purpose of their institution in the greater scheme of things. A theology of institutions must help us to make this essential connection between that which is of pressing and immediate concern and what, on the other hand, is of ultimate importance.

Four Theological Premises for Holding Organizations In Trust

As part of our effort to contribute to the development of such a theology, we have identified four theological premises or affirmations which shape the way we regard organizations and consequently how we engage them. While some of these affirmations existed in the form of "theological hypotheses" at the outset of our work, they also emerged from our effort to see and think theologically while standing in the midst of organizational life with all of the complex dilemmas that face God's people in these settings. These affirmations form the basis of a *practical theology of institutions*, constituting a theology capable of informing our practice.

Premise #1: Institutions are part of God's order. Walter Wink, a biblical scholar whose writings on the *powers and principalities* have powerfully shaped our theological understanding of institutions, writes: "These Powers are the necessary social structures of human life, and it is not a matter of indifference to God that they exist. God made them. For this reason ... the account of creation in Genesis does not end in chapter 2, with the creation of the world, but in chapter 10, with the creation of the nations ... The meaning is clear," he concludes. "Humanity is not possible apart from its social institutions."^{vi}

Premise #2: God loves institutions. As part of God's world, institutions are the object of God's love. It is not enough, however, to say that God loves institutions in an abstract or general sense. Our tradition understands God's love to be not only a universal attribute of the Divine, but also the essence of God's intimate concern for each of us individually. Believing that God's love is both universal and particular, we are compelled to declare not only that God loves institutions in general, but also that God loves each institution in all of its messy particularity.

SESSION III: CONSIDERING A THEORY OF ORGANIZATIONS

From our perspective, the implications of this assertion are stunning! They begin to become apparent when you try out the premise by completing the statement, “God loves _____” with the name of particular institutions. God loves Landry’s Bicycles. God loves Reell Precision Manufacturing, and God loves the University of St. Thomas.

So far, so good. What goes on for you, however, when you attempt to similarly affirm other, perhaps less likely, institutions? God loves Enron, WorldCom, or Tyco? If you are anything like us, this latter assertion may leave you a little edgy. Nevertheless, we believe it is true, and that rooting ourselves in this conviction offers an important basis for the kind of compassionate regard for organizations that is capable of enabling us to serve as critical lovers who hold these institutions in trust.^{vii}

Premise #3: Institutions are living systems. The affirmation that institutions are living systems links two important assertions, both fundamental to seeing institutions whole. The first is that *institutions are alive*. To say this is to recognize that the “being-ness” of institutions is comprised not only of its more tangible outward and physicality (e.g. its facilities, people, formal organizational and information systems, technology and equipment). Along with this a perhaps less-tangible interiority or animating spirit whose energy is reflected through a combination of historical memory, shared convictions and dreams, proud successes and bitter disappointments. This animating spirit (spoken of by others as an organization’s DNA or culture) is enduring, a red thread persevering through the institution’s storyline over time, and must be well understood by those who would seek to hold the organization in trust.

The other assertion of this premise is that *institutions are systems*. As such they are wholly interdependent with the entire evolving world around them, both *impacting* and *impacted by* everything that takes place throughout the constantly emerging reality of the existing order. A fundamental reflective discipline of healthy organizations is maintaining a consistent awareness of these twin dimensions of the institution’s utter interdependence with the world around it: both its fundamental dependence upon that world along with the inevitable intended and unintended consequences of its decisions and actions upon that same world.

The recognition of institutions as systems also has significant implications for the way we understand the internal life of organizations-as a whole comprised of a constant and dynamic interdependence of countless elements exercising conspicuous or invisible influence on one another.^{viii}

SESSION III: CONSIDERING A THEORY OF ORGANIZATIONS

The three-fold model organizational life developed by Seeing Things Whole and presented later in this essay is a theological recognition of the systemic nature of organizations.

It is around this awareness of organizations as systems (and as existing within systems) that we find particularly relevant both Robert Greenleaf's reminder that the root meaning of the word religion (*re ligio*) is to re-bind, and his recognition of the importance of seeing things whole as the basis for this.

Premise #4: Institutions are gifted and called, they are fallen, and they are capable of being redeemed. Here we have three important theological assertions about the nature of organizations embedded in a single statement. While each is essential in its own right, they are presented here together for an important reason.

Institutions are gifted and called: As expressions of God's dynamic and unfolding order, institutions are here for a reason. They are intended to be instruments of God's healing and reconciling purposes, and are both gifted and called to serve the common good in particular ways. They exist for good purposes, are capable of good things, and good things are expected of them.

Institutions are fallen: As members of God's order, institutions are prone to inflating and protecting themselves, to forgetting their membership in the larger community of God's creation, and to acting in ways that neglect or harm the common good. In this sense, they are much like each of us, capable both of great good and immeasurable harm.

Institutions are capable of being redeemed: Unlike the first two dimensions of this assertion which to many may appear self-evident, this third is clearly a statement of faith. No matter how apparently fallen or broken, institutions are capable of reawakening to their own best possibilities. Part of holding an organization in trust is calling it back toward a recommitment to this potential. This is particularly difficult when the institution's sensibilities have become anesthetized by the gratification of their self interests, paralyzed by fear or anger, or burdened by the shame of past failures. Fundamental to holding an organization in trust around its brokenness is the recognition that all three of these realities—that the institution is gifted and called, that it is fallen, and that it is capable of being reawakened to its best possibilities—all three of these exist in every institution. Moreover, they exist not as mutually exclusive truths, but rather they coexist *simultaneously* as possibilities within the life of each institution, each present in some measure at any given moment in the organization's life.^{ix}

These four premises form the basis a practical theology of institutions that

SESSION III: CONSIDERING A THEORY OF ORGANIZATIONS

- recognizes the place of organizations in God’s larger order and purposes,
 - expects them to contribute to the greater good of the world around them,
- and
- recognizes that they, like us, are wholly God’s both when they fulfill their best possibilities and when they fail to do so.

ⁱ Richard Broholm, “Trustees of the Universe: Recovering The Whole Ministry of the People of God. (Shelburne Falls, Massachusetts: Seeing Things Whole, 2001), 3.

ⁱⁱ Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Letters and Papers from Prison*. ed. Eberhard Bethge (New York: Macmillan, 1971), 81.

ⁱⁱⁱ The initial call for the development of a *theology of institutions* emerged simultaneously from two persons who, as far as we know, did not know one another. One was Robert Greenleaf, a student of organizations and leadership during his career within AT&T and later during his years as a consultant to leadership in universities, business foundations and religious institutions developed the notion of *servant-leadership*. The other was a prophetic American Baptist Church leader by the name of Jitsuo Morikawa who in the 1960s initiated an action-research program of the World Council of Churches in Philadelphia to explore how the church could more effectively relate to men and women who serve in so-called “secular” organizations within an urban context. For a lengthier consideration of Greenleaf and Morikawa’s respective calls for the development of a theology of institutions, see *Toward A Theology Of Institutions* by Specht and Broholm (Indianapolis: Greenleaf Center for Servant Leadership, 2003) and *Trustees of the Universe: Recovering the Whole Ministry of the People of God* by Richard Broholm (Shelburne Falls, Massachusetts: Seeing Things Whole, 2001).

^{iv} In this essay (and in our work) we use the words *institution* and *organization* interchangeably.

^v These words are drawn from John Gardner’s 1968 address at Cornell University, recalled in *A Strategy of Hope: Lay Ministry For Organizational Change*. (Philadelphia: Metropolitan Associates of Philadelphia, 1972), 48.

^{vi} Walter Wink, *Engaging the Powers*. (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1992), 66. In his own footnote, Wink credits this important insight to Hebrew Scripture scholar Gerhard von Rad. 66.

^{vii} We are indebted to John Dalla Costa for his observation that this premise lays the groundwork for an engagement with organizational leaders whose first movement is pastoral. God loves each of these organizations, not because they deserve it because they are good, but rather because they are God’s. In the end, however, our engagement with organizations cannot remain pastoral only. God’s love is the occasion for God’s pain as well – especially so given the inevitable participation of each of us, individuals and organizations alike, in the fallenness of creation as well as its goodness.

^{viii} Here we are particularly indebted to Russell Ackoff and Margaret Wheatley for helping us to come alive to the systemic nature of life in general and of organizations in particular.

^{ix} Here again we are indebted for this insight to Walter Wink, *Engaging The Powers*. (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1992), 65-85.