

# Haunted by the Holy: Reflecting Theologically on Organizational Life

by Mick Comstock

*In this column, pastor-theologian Mick Comstock offers the first in a series of theological reflections on organizational life. These reflections emerge in part out of Mick's visits to some of STW's action-research organizations, where he met with organizational leaders who are seeking to implement the use of explicit values as a way of supporting faithful organizational performance.*

I would like to venture some beginning thoughts with members of the Seeing Things Whole community about what it might mean to think and speak theologically about organizational life and performance. I feel privileged to have been able to listen in on conversations at several of STW's action-research sites—Pollak, Landry's Bicycles, Tanager Financial Services, and Norwalk Hospital—and to have been made to feel welcome at each place. I look forward to the opportunity to participate more fully in these discussions and to pursue the question of how the conversations appropriate to the realm of work are haunted by the conversations of the realm of the holy.

David Specht shared with me that STW was seeking a pastoral theologian to participate in these conversations. My guess is that there is implied a contrast with a more academic approach. I have thought about that contrast for a long time in order to get clear about my own movement from the academy to the parish.

It was easy to think of that movement as one of ceasing to be a theologian in order to be a pastor. That is certainly how it looked from the perspective of the academy, but I was convinced that it was a change of setting and not of vocation and not therefore needed to be clear about how that change of setting changed what it meant to be a theologian. Because I look at this

opportunity to think and speak theologically in the context of your conversations in organizational settings as yet another change of setting but not of vocation, my hope is that the clarity I achieved in that first move might prove helpful in this one.

One of the ways that I expressed for myself the contrast between academic and pastoral theology was that, whereas the academic theologian lives and thinks out of one book and into another, the pastoral theologian lives and thinks out of and speaks into the manifold conversations of a particular community. This emerged for me during a preaching class I was teaching at Harvard Divinity School. We were trying to come to an understanding of preaching as the medium of pastoral theology, as writing is the medium of academic theology.

This is helpful in one way but also highlights a dilemma that emerges in the movement from a parish setting to a secular setting. For clearly a theological thinking and speaking that arises out of and speaks into the conversation of these institutions is what we are looking for. The dilemma, however, concerns the medium. What, in the setting of a secular enterprise where presumably there are no occasions for preaching, would be the medium of theological speaking?

Part of the problem lies in how we understand preaching. It is tempting, particularly for the preacher, to think of preaching as privileged with the last word on any given topic. But, according

to the contrast above, this understanding is more appropriate for the academician, who is obligated to attempt to write the last word on any given subject even though he or she can never succeed. By the definition above, the preacher is obliged to try to speak maybe the first word (when he or she is being prophetic), more often a subsequent word (when being pastoral), but seldom the last word in the community's conversation on any given subject.

So, even though preaching may look like a monologue, and often quacks like a monologue we know it isn't really a monologue, but we still lack clarity about what a theological dialogue might be like in the setting of a secular institution. We need to press further the question of medium, and we need to develop a clearer contrast between the church and secular settings. To address the former, let me try another expression of a contrast between academic and pastoral theology.

***How might the conversations appropriate to the realm of work be haunted by the conversations of the realm of the holy? My own hunch is that the haunting happens at the crossroads of all the realms in which we lead our lives.***

This also emerged in that preaching class and for the same reasons: Whereas Historical Theology deals with how God has acted in the

past, and Systematic Theology deals with how God behaves in general, Pastoral Theology has to catch God at it. So the question of medium becomes, "What manner of thinking and speaking is most likely to be able to catch God at it?"

There is a nice analogy emerging here with photography, wherein academic theology can be likened to still photography and pastoral theology to

the making of moving pictures. So the question might be put like this: "What manner of thinking and speaking is to movie-making as academic writing is to still photography?" And the answer to the question of the right medium for pastoral theology suddenly becomes obvious: Storytelling. Because, whereas an academic essay necessarily strives for some eternal trueness, a story tries to catch ... or be caught by ... its truths in their movement through time and space.

We have witnessed the transformation of theology as we have followed it in its movement from academy to parish.

Now, by discovering storytelling as its proper medium we have liberated pastoral theology from its location in the church and have freed it to move from place to place, and thus we are freed to follow it into the workplace. For preaching is just one form of storytelling, one that is appropriate to the gathering of a community in its place of worship. Now the question is: "What form of theological

storytelling would make sense in a place of secular work?" Or perhaps better, "Is there a point at which the storytelling that occurs in the work-place might become theological?"

In order to answer that question, we have to become clearer about what is involved in this change of location. When people go to church or temple or synagogue or mosque or to their special places of solitude, they leave behind the places in which they lead their everyday lives in order to enter intentionally into the vicinity of the holy. They don't leave their everyday lives behind but, carry them instead, whether they want to

or not, into, as a theist might say, the light of the love and judgment of God.

Another way to tell the same story that would give us some useful theological language and also a bridge into settings where the language being used is that of core values would be to tell it in terms of "kingdoms" or "realms". Thus, when people go into the vicinity of the holy, they allow the core values of the realms in which they lead their everyday lives in the world to be shown up in the light of the core values of, as Jesus said to Pilate, "a kingdom not of this world".

But when people go to work they are entering one of their "worldly" realms.

he conversations about core values sponsored by Seeing Things Whole take place in the middle of the realm of work, not intentionally or obviously in the vicinity of the holy. So at what

point could these conversations become theological? How might the conversations appropriate to the realm of work be haunted by the conversations of the realm of the holy?

My own hunch is that the haunting happens at the crossroads of all the realms in which lead our lives. If we only lived in one realm with one set of core values there would be no theological conversation because there would be no need for it. The need arises because we inhabit so many realms, each with its own values, each with its own relative power to inspire or coerce our loyalties. We are not only workers, but also spouses and parents, citizens of

local, national, and now increasingly global communities.

Our fondest fantasy is that the claims of all of these realms of our life will somehow be miraculously harmonized, so that in being responsible to the values of one we might be automatically responsive to the claims of all. Our second-favorite wish is that we might divide our time... be, as I heard someone serious assert, the corporation's person from 9 to 5 and a good citizen after supper. Our experience is otherwise, however, and we are faced always with having to decide among competing and sometimes clashing legitimate demands.

The most terrible, and yet by far the most common choices we have to make are not between good and evil, but between competing, conflicting goods. It is choice of this sort, because it eludes even the most sophisticated rational and ethical calculus, that throws us into the realm of the religious and, if we are to be thoughtful about it, the theological. It is here that the great perennial themes of the religions emerge: sacrifice, judgment, repentance, forgiveness, and the divine healing of both souls and contexts.

And this is made all the more complex and difficult by the fact that it is not only as individuals that we are thrown into such dilemmas. Our working groups, our families, our communities, sometimes our nations, and more and more the global emerging community all find themselves at one time or another cast for the very same reasons into the vicinity of the holy. And when this happens, the question of how we are to talk together, what is to be the medium of our conversation, becomes of primary importance.

Each of the realms in which we lead our lives has its own stories. There are the stories of the companies and institutions involved already in conversation with STW; there are the life stories of the people who lead these enterprises and of their employees; there are the stories of the towns, regions, countries, in which they root and grow; there are the stories we tell ourselves and each other about

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economic growth and development. These stories and their harmonies and dissonances are the stuff of religious conversation. In Christian and Jewish practice, storytelling becomes theological when we allow the stories in which we live our lives to be laid alongside the stories of the tradition, to be interrogated by those stories and to interrogate them with our own.

For example, although I'm not quite sure why, I have, since sitting in on the ethical conversations of folks at Pollak, Tanager, Norwalk Hospital and Landry's, been haunted by David, the boy hero, the military genius, the forger of empire, the lousy father, the aging ineffectual king, the beloved friend of God. I can see ways that the stories of David's movement through his life might fruitfully be laid alongside the stories of the development of a company, or an individual career, or an entire industry. My hunch is that sparks would fly between these narratives, and that insight and understanding of tellers and hearers would be enriched in the process.

The stories of the religious traditions are inexhaustible, and they have accompanied us on our long journey down through time. It would be surprising to me if we were not to discover them with us in our present travels. I look forward to the opportunity to see if this is so. ■

*Mick Comstock serves as an interim pastor in the United Church of Christ. His previous reflections exploring this theme of faith and organizational life were originally published in The Bridge, the newsletter for Seeing Things Whole, and can be viewed at STW's web site at [www.seeingthingswhole.org](http://www.seeingthingswhole.org).*