

# Speaking of God: Functional Theism in Organizational Life

by Mick Comstock

*In this column, pastor-theologian Mick Comstock continues a series of theological reflections on organizational life. This series began with the article [Haunted by the Holy](#) [PDF] (29 KB). These reflections emerge in part out of Mick's conversations with colleagues in 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.*

**A**t Seeing Things Whole's annual Fall Retreat, I was privileged to participate as part of a team invited to reflect theologically on organizational case studies presented by Reell Precision Manufacturing, Pollak Switch Products Division, and Tanager Financial Services, all organizations with whom STW has been working. In the course of our conversations that morning, the observation was made that much ethical discourse within organizational life is functionally atheistic, in that it proceeds without explicit reference to God. In part, this was in response to STW's action-research efforts with these organizations to explore the development of a way of organizational reflection using the language of values that doesn't require of participants specific faith commitments, or that might be participated in by people from a number of differing faith commitments. This commitment on the part of STW is particularly important, because many of the organizations with whom they are in conversation operate in the public and secular marketplace.

As a compliment to this emphasis, I've begun to think some more about the use of biblical stories as another way of exploring the intersection of faith and organizational life, and particularly whether the promise of exploring these

stories might lie in providing for a functional theism that also doesn't require people to have specific belief in God in order to be able to take part, or that would allow people with differing faith commitments to engage in conversation together about matters of ultimate importance. In this article, I mean to explore the possibilities of the kind of functional theism that is at once critical and affirmative.

I want to begin with the question of just what it is that speaking of God does to a conversation, and why it might be a good thing to do in the settings like Reell, Tanager and Pollak. In an article in the Summer 2000 issue of *The Bridge*, I put the question this way: "How might the conversations appropriate to the realm of work be haunted by the conversations of the realm of the holy?" and I ventured this provisional answer:

*My own hunch is that the haunting happens at the crossroads of the various realms in which we 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, as well as citizens of local, national, and now increasingly global communities.*

But now the question is, what does such a haunting do? One way to get at an answer is to pay attention to what happens as we negotiate the claims of each of the realms we live in. If, for instance, we must attend to the pressing business of one realm, we have to focus on the values of that realm and the necessities that they engender,

sometimes at the expense of the other realms. But at some point we have to account for that cost and either justify it, or attempt to restore a balance that has been temporarily lost, or accomplish some combination of the two.

The easiest solution is to simplify the question of the distribution of benefits and costs by giving the claims of one of the realms in which we live an absolute status that relativizes the claims of all the others. Then, the fact that one realm always reaps a greater portion of the benefits and the others always bear the bulk of the costs can be seen as "just the way it is meant to be." Whether or not it is meant to be is a theological question.

Already we are in the thick of the themes of which religious traditions are made. When we speak of the claims upon us of the realms that make up our lives, we are already talking about fidelity. When we talk of focusing on the claims of one realm at the expense of the others we are beginning to speak the language of sacrifice. Implicit in the talk of the distribution of benefits and costs is the issue of justice. The balancing of accounts implies judgment, redemption, and maybe forgiveness. One more, suggested by the absolutizing of the claims of one realm over the others, is idolatry. And with the naming of idolatry the reality of the possibility of sin rears its ugly head.

In pursuit of the question of what speaking of God does to a conversation let us look more closely at the theme of idolatry. While we may not readily speak of God, we will cheerfully seek to absolutize what is relative when it suits our purposes, and that is the definition of idolatry. The problem of idolatry suggests that one of the purposes of a functional theism might be to counter a very functional idolatry that our

tendency to create absolutes brings into play without God ever being mentioned.

Of course, the final irony of idolatry is that the god we create is ourselves, for who else but a god could create an absolute. For the idolatry to be functional, this fact has to be veiled of course, especially from ourselves, unless we are merely cynical manipulators, which most of us aren't. To be functional, theism must help us to catch ourselves at the idolatry to which we are prone.

It may be helpful to refer to a biblical story at this point. When confronted by Moses about the golden calf, his brother Aaron responded, "We threw all our gold into the fire and out came this calf. And we became afraid and fell down and worshipped it." Here the self-delusion necessary for effective idolatry is deftly made clear and held up for ridicule, along with poor Aaron and, even more, along with our poor selves for whom the story is being told and who don't share Aaron's great good fortune of being long dead.

With this, perhaps a richer answer might be ventured to the question of what it is that speaking of God does to a conversation. What speaking of God does to a conversation is to smoke out the theology that speaks silently in all conversations which take place at the boundaries of the realms in which we live our lives, and in whose very silence lies the danger of unexamined idolatry.

Having said this, I then have to say quickly that it is only part of the answer. It deals with speaking of God in the mode of criticism, but leaves unaddressed the question of whether there is also a speaking of God that is both functional, in the way that we've been speaking of it, and affirmative. Let me turn to a true story to help us explore this mode of speaking of God.

Tom Henry, who is a regular participant in the conversations of Seeing Things Whole, tells a story that might be helpful in exploring this part of the question. Tom is CEO of Landry Bicycles, a small chain of retail bicycle shops in the Greater Boston area. He has played a powerful leadership role in the formation of an alliance of leading bicycle retailers from across the country with Specialized, one of the foremost manufacturers of high quality bicycles.

In the midst of one of the conversations leading toward the formation of the Specialized Dealers Alliance, Tom put a question to some of his colleagues at Specialized. Those of you who know Tom well know that he is a person of faith, and that therefore the theological question that he put to his colleagues at Specialized was not merely functional. But Tom also

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loves to tease people with theological questions to see how they'll respond, loves what happens to conversations when God is mentioned, and so you might suspect that his question was also functional, and therefore might provide us with a way of pursuing the second part of our question (how might a functional theism offer not only critical perspective, but affirmative perspective as well?).

Here is what Tom asked: Do you think that God loves Specialized?"

You can imagine the range of reactions and responses by paying attention to your own. What a stunning question! And people were stunned by the question, some by its stupidity, some by its profundity. Some people were exasperated, and some were caused to wonder, and some reacted in all these ways and, I would guess, some were merely bored. My question is, "What

would happen to the conversation if you answered, 'yes'?"

A bible story might help here: When Jesus came up from the water, the heavens opened, and the Spirit of God descended upon him in the form of a dove, and a voice was heard from heaven, saying, "You are my son, my beloved, in whom I am well pleased."

The Gospel of Mark says that when Jesus heard this declaration of love, "the Spirit drove him into the wilderness, and there he remained for forty days tempted by Satan." Is it possible that the prospect of being loved by God was as stunning to Jesus as it was to the hearers of Tom's question? What is it about this affirmation that makes it so disorienting?

As a child I recall asking my Sunday School teacher if Jesus was really tempted, and was greatly relieved when she answered that he certainly was not. But as we grow older and come to understand that being good was a far more complex thing than we had ever anticipated, it becomes important for us to imagine that he was tempted, because we are, and we need to know if there is hope for us. In our fevered adolescence we hoped that it was sex that tempted him. It was only later, as we entered more fully into our own strength, that we began to understand why it was power that was so seductive for him.

The Gospel of Luke helps us here, by providing insight into the character of the temptation that was aroused by the divine declaration of love. "If you are the Son of God, tell this stone to become bread ... All this empire will I give to you, and the glory that goes with it ... If you are the Son of God, throw yourself down (from the parapet of the temple) for Scripture says, 'He will give his angels charge over you', and 'they will carry you in their arms lest you should strike your foot upon a stone.'"

Here is a mystery, that when Jesus was offered love, his first response was to fantasize about power. But of course love is, especially in its opening

moments, very empowering. So power itself is not the problem, but the uses to which it is put. And, ultimately, it is love that is the problem.

When we dwell for a moment with the uses to which Jesus imagined putting his power, they become very familiar. They are our dearest childhood wishes about being powerful: to have whatever we want whenever we want it; to be able to tell everybody what to do and have them do it; to dazzle our friends and enemies with feats of physical prowess—to fly, in fact. These desires stir in us always as we experience, wishfully or actually, our powerfulness, and this may be reason enough to fend off the question of whether we are loved by God. If we were so loved, what terrible thing might we do with our power?

But an even more terrifying question is buried in the first one and it is this: If we are so loved, what must we do with our power? The first question recoils from limitless power, but this one implies a limit, and an obligation, which provides even more reason to fend off the question of whether we are loved by God.

Jesus' first, magical, response to the divine declaration of love was this momentary sense of limitless power. His second response was to say no to it. "Man cannot live by bread alone ... You shall do homage to the Lord your God and worship him alone ... You shall not put the Lord your God to the test." This leaves us with the real mystery: If Jesus, the beloved one of God, says no to self-aggrandizing uses of power, what is it that he says yes to? And for us, what would be the obligations implicit in our own empowerment if we understood ourselves to be so loved?

We began by asking whether or not a functional theology was possible. That led to the question of just what it is that speaking of God might do to a conversation. To that end, we have explored some possibilities of a theological speaking that is critical and of a theological speaking that is affirmative. The former brought into

view our penchant for idolatry, one of the profound lies to which we are prone. The latter, by exploring the possibility that love might underlay our empowerment, and displaying the dangers of power even in the service of love, lead us into a deeper realization of the possibility that obligation might be implicit in our power.

There is another question and another answer concerning a functional theology. The question is, why would anyone want to further complicate the life of their organization by engaging in theological reflection if not driven to it by their faith? An answer that grows out of this reflection might be, "In order to more richly and fully understand and fulfill the obligation implicit in the power of their organization." ■

*Mick Comstock serves as pastor of the Charlemont Federated Church. He continues this series of reflections with [Speaking of God Loving](#) [PDF](14 KB). His previous writings exploring this theme of faith and organizational life were 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). Rev. Comstock welcomes your comments by email at [COMICAL@rcn.com](mailto:COMICAL@rcn.com).*