

Seeing Things
Whole

Thinkpiece #1

On Developing A Theology of Institutions

by Richard Broholm
February, 1994

Note to the Reader

This is one of a series of think pieces from *Seeing Things Whole*, an action-research project focused on exploring the relationship between faith and organizational life. As you will quickly gather from your reading of this and the other think pieces, our work on the theology of institutions is very much a work in progress.

As reader, then, you are entering into our conversation that is in the midst of forming and clarifying itself. These think pieces have been one way that the group of colleagues involved in this project have been attempting to surface and invite critique around some of the assumptions which underlie and guide our efforts. Some of these ideas will evolve as the exploration continues. Others will undoubtedly fall by the wayside.

What is clear, however, is that there are a growing number of friends who wish to be part of this emerging conversation — persons who care deeply about pressing our understanding of what it means for institutions to stand fully accountable to God for the faithful exercise of their gifts and resources.

Welcome to the dialogue.

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Think Piece # 1:

On Developing A Theology of Institutions

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In these early days of re-visiting the 1980's work on a theology of institutions we are working on a number of different issues:

- why undertake this work in the first place?
- what value can it have for those who care for and lead institutions?
- the problem of religious language in the “secular” environment of the typical institution
- how to engage the best of the theological tradition, keeping faith with its enduring insights and, at the same time, push the edges of that discipline to include and illumine the world of institutions?
- how to develop a model for theological reflection that:
 - a) draws on the theological tradition as the principal source of illumination
 - b) makes a difference in how people see and lead their organizations
- how to integrate, where appropriate, the sweeping changes that are already taking place in the way organizational leaders are thinking about organizational purpose and effectiveness. (The time is ripe for this work. Just about everywhere I turn I come across articles describing the paradigmatic shift that is taking place. Whether we are in a position to make a contribution to this movement remains to be seen, but the need for such an effort is becoming self-evident.)

So this and future “think pieces” are intended to push our thinking and writing on some of these issues.

1. Why bother with theology?

The February 9 issue of Christian Century carries an article with this title. In it William Placher writes, “Theology has a bad reputation in most Christian churches these days--it’s regarded as obscure, hard to understand, irrelevant, a bit of a joke.” He goes on to argue that in spite of its low repute theology matters a great deal. “Theology begins to put together a way of looking... at the world in all its variety” and “ a language that we share as Christians that provides a context rich enough for discussing the complexities of our lives”. Placher then quotes Edward Farley who has done a serious critique of contemporary theological education in the seminary reminding us that most members of a typical congregation “carry out all kinds of complicated tasks in their work...High-school-age members move easily and quickly into complex worlds of computers, foreign languages, DNA , and calculus, and [yet] cannot even make a beginning in historical-critical interpretation of a single text of Scripture...In the face of the modern democratization of education and learning, how is it that the

church continues to settle for the pre-modern pattern of educated clergy and uneducated laity and for the almost uncrossable gulf between theological education [clergy] and church education?"

Placher lays some of the blame for this situation at the doorstep of theologians. "Theologians have been writing for other scholars rather than for the church and its people. The path to tenure and promotion leads through technical writing in scholarly journals and specialized monographs and that is the path we theologians have too often followed. We talk about issues of interest only to a few fellow scholars, or, even when we write about matters of concern to ordinary Christian folk, we write in a jargon they won't understand". (This reality makes me appreciate all the more Gabe Fackre's willingness to work with us on the development of a theology of institutions. He helps us understand and keep faithful to the core of the theological tradition and, at the same time, willingly engages us in pushing its boundaries to include the world of organizations. That's a great gift!)

Finally, Placher insists that "ordinary Christians are not unable to engage in serious reflection about their faith" nor are they unwilling....". In a sense" he says "...we do think about theology all the time". Unfortunately, and not unexpectedly, his illustrations of lay people doing theology or thinking theologically are focused solely on church issues and problems.

My own assumption is that everyone of us is already doing theological reflection whether we are aware of it or not. Every decision we make is a reflection of what we believe about God and the world God created. This is true for Christian and unbeliever. What we decide and how we choose to act is fundamentally an implicit statement of what we believe and who we believe in; what we hold in trust and who we trust. The theology reflected may be bad theology or deny even the existence of a "theos", but it still is a reflection of what we believe about ourselves and our world. Conscious or not (and I would suspect that most of our decisions are unconscious reflections of what we believe) our behavior mirrors our basic beliefs. So an effort to bring to consciousness what each of us believes about the world and to examine how those beliefs influence and shape our decisions seems not only appropriate and vital to responsible action but a reflection of what is already happening, even at an unconscious level.

Our effort to create a model for theological reflection is simply an attempt to encourage thoughtful reflection on our decision-making and to bring it to a level of consciousness that can be illumined and critiqued by others and by the Christian theological tradition.

I believe we are also operating on a second, critical assumption. We are attempting to push this work one step further by suggesting that not only individuals but organizations have belief systems that guide and inform their actions. (I want to acknowledge here the obvious: that our stated beliefs and our operational beliefs may be, and often are, very divergent. All the more reason why an attempt to bring this to conscious reflection is important work!)

The theological reflection model we are working on attempts, among other things, to bring an organization's core beliefs and values to

consciousness in order to understand how they impact and inform future actions. Obviously, this is not easy. What constitutes an organization's core beliefs--beliefs that drive its behavior--are not readily discernible. Fortunately, more and more organizations are attempting to discern these inner impulses and to bring clarity to those values which they want to shape the organization's behavior. The Lilly work on "Depth Reflection" is an illustration of one model of reflection which attempts to unearth this data. But we shouldn't be surprised at the difficulty of what we are attempting. That it is important, I have no doubt.

We also are struggling to utilize the Christian theological tradition as a source of illumination and insight to these strategic organizational decisions and efforts to discern core values. We are making this effort because we believe that the God revealed in Jesus Christ is also the Creator, Sustainer and Redeemer of our world and "all that dwells therein". We believe this faith affirmation includes organizations and environments as well as people. This is a faith statement for us, but it is also the reason we believe this work is a worthwhile, in fact, critical endeavor.

To push this work ahead we have chosen to utilize the ancient theological tradition of the three-fold office of Christ as a resource for understanding how organizations function and as a means of illumining proposed organizational strategies.

Our early efforts with the three-fold office seemed to open up some compelling insights about how organizations actually work. Among other insights it helped us understand the legitimate tensions that exist between the various stakeholders in an organization and how holding them in creative balance can be a mark of organizational "faithfulness".

However, we need to press this way of thinking about organizations much more deeply to see if it continues to reflect organizational reality. Our in-depth interviews with a variety of organizations, our keeping current with the latest organizational literature, and our actually using this model of reflection with leaders on specific organizational problems is our current strategy for research and development.

2. The three-fold office as a conceptual model for organizations.

Our use of the three-fold office poses a number of perplexing and challenging issues beyond the fundamental question as to whether or not it is theologically appropriate:

- what do we mean by the term "office"?
- and what is its secular organizational equivalent?
- when we are using it with an organization can we comfortably assume that there are three such entities (and only three) in every organization?
- . . .and, if so, what do they refer to?

- are these spheres equal in weight and importance as they are in the theological model of the three-fold office?
- does the secular equivalent of the three fold office relate structurally to the way at least some organizations are currently organized or are we confronting a possible new paradigm in the way we structure and lead organizations?

To start the ball rolling, let's see if we can develop some clarity re: what we mean by the word "office".

The dictionary carries several different meanings:

- a work
- something performed or intended to be performed for another
- a specified kind of service done through someone's good (or ill) offices
- a function or duty assigned to someone as an essential part of their work or position
- the function or characteristic action of a particular thing
- a position of authority or trust
- the building, room or space in which the affairs of a business or profession are carried on
- the people who work in that space
- a religious service or set of prayers (eg. divine office)

The words and ideas that seem to stand out to me suggest that an "office" might be understood as a "field of influence" or "service" with certain defined characteristics and responsibilities. An "office", in this view, is expected to hold in trust these characteristics (values) and to manage them responsibly on behalf of the well-being of the whole organization. Since we are assuming that there is more than one "office" and each office represents or holds in trust a different set of characteristics (values), then the well-being of the whole organizations is determined by how effectively all offices negotiate and manage their differences together.

Let's examine how these assumptions actually play out in different settings.

In this country we speak of the "office of the President". Included in this "office" are a significant number of staff who both serve the President and, in certain instances, speak for the President. The office of the President carries with it implicit powers and is able to exert significant but not unlimited influence. In our tri-part form of governance there is an attempt to balance the power of the President with other "offices" who carry different but related powers, responsibilities and influence: Congress and the courts. Implicit in the design of this structure is the conviction that an "office" needs power to act effectively but that unbridled power inevitably is corrupted. Thus the Constitution provides a means of balancing power between the "offices" to avoid the corruption of power, but also to hopefully ensure the ability to act. By this structure it is assumed that there are different functions that need to interact to increase the likelihood of wise decisions and effective action.

Operationally, outside the realm of government we have tended to build our organizations with a strong tilt toward one defining sphere of influence or

“office”. For example in business the “office” of economic viability has been usually given the dominant or overwhelming power. We have charged this office with the “bottom line of profitability” (though this is frequently overshadowed by the self-interests of chief executives, etc.). In many service organizations the over-riding “office” has been serving the needs of a particular client group (though, in practice, the needs of the staff or the principles of the profession often become the over-riding concern). In educational institutions we are told that the “unbridled quest for truth” is the primary sphere of influence and over-riding bottom-line (but in practice institutional self-preservation or pre-occupation with academic credentials often becomes the central norm for action.)

We are proposing that every institution carries three “offices” or spheres of influence, none of which can be delegated ultimate authority and power over the other two without imperiling the health and well-being of the organization and its ability to faithfully carry out its trust.

One further comment on the idea of “office” as a field of influence. In the attached article “Love In the Office” by Bennett Sims, he describes the ground-breaking work of Margaret Wheatley in her new book **Leadership and the New Science**. Wheatley who is a consultant to business, seems to be reaching for what we have been calling an “office” when she talks about field theory. Let me quote from Bennett’s description:

“In one of her chapters Meg talks about ‘field theory’. What she says is that we used to think space was empty. The new science knows that this is another figment. Space is loaded with ‘fields of influence’---not just the pull of gravity, but a kind of living tissue of interactive energy---both in the interior of the atom which is 99.999% ‘empty’ space and in the exterior of spaces between the stars, and especially in the invisible spaces between people.”

“Recently,” she writes, “while doing work on customer service for a retail chain, I asked employees to visit several stores. After spending time in many stores, we all compared notes. To a person we agreed that we would ‘feel’ good customer service just by walking into the store. We tried to get more specific by looking at visual clues, merchandise layouts, facial expressions---but none of that could explain the sure sense we had when we walked into the store that we would be treated well. Something else was going on. Something else was in the air. We could feel; we just couldn’t describe why we felt it.” (p 52)

“Meg goes on to say that this kind of field didn’t just move unbidden into the store. Its palpability was the work of leadership---managers who, together with workers, took time to fill the space with clear visions about how they wanted people to be served---managers and their workers who filled the ‘empty’ spaces with themselves, making it possible for others to feel LOVE IN THE OFFICE. ‘With such a powerful structuring field, certain types of individual behaviors and events were guaranteed.’”

Obviously, there is a lot here we may want to deal with, but, for the moment, I want to focus on the idea of “office” as a field of influence. No matter how an organization might choose to structure an office, describe responsibilities, carry out a plan of action, etc. Meg Wheatley and her

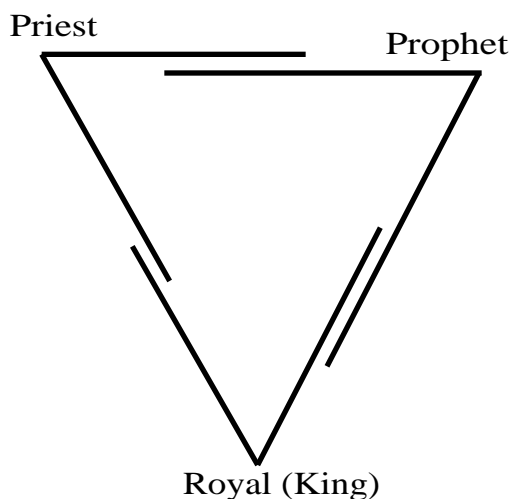
interpreter Bennett Sims are pointing us toward a more dynamic and spiritual reality. They are inviting us to think about the spirit of an organization which, though influenced by rules, policies, job descriptions, training manuals, etc. cannot be mechanistically created by same. It strikes me that in our attempt to think about and describe the three “offices” of any organization as corollaries of the three offices of Christ we are dealing with spheres or fields of influence which characterize the very heart and spirit of an organization. They are dynamic entities that we are attempting to understand, illumine and utilize but they will always be much more than something that can be exhausted by our insights or reproduced by our techniques. We are dealing with mystery in the theological sense of that term and thus “office” will always be something more rather than something less. I think if we approach our efforts to define and understand the three-fold office from that perspective we will come closer to building a meaningful and helpful resource for organizational reflection and action.

Maybe that doesn't make much sense to you, but it was important for me to acknowledge this reality before moving to a discussion of how we might define the “offices” for use in our emerging reflection process and within a given organization.

3. Building A Theological Reflection Model Using The Three Offices of Christ As Prophet, Priest and King

In our earlier work to develop a theology of institutions we conceived of the three offices describing a set of values for any organization which, when held together in some kind of creative balance, enabled us to see and understand the organization as a whole.

We used the image of a triangle to reflect this dynamic interaction. Soon we saw the unbroken triangle as too static an image to capture the reality of most organizations and moved to picture this dynamic with the following image.



Our exposure to the organizational realities of members of our research task force helped us understand how these three “offices” or spheres of influence engage each other and mirror the tensions that exist between the legitimate but often conflicting values in each office. Balancing these tensions in a creative and healthy way constitutes a significant management challenge. In fact we began to posit the assumption that the movement toward “faithfulness” in an organization lies in holding the values of each office (and the self-interests of their respective stakeholders) in creative balance with a tilt toward those values which have historically been ignored or diminished. More on this in future “think pieces”.

How to define and describe the distinct characteristics of each of the offices?

I won’t attempt to either bore or confuse you with each of the defining efforts we made in the early years, but rather suggest my current feelings about what best captures these dynamic fields of influence.

At this moment I would define the word “office” as a sphere of influence in an organization which holds in trust certain core values and oversees responsibility for the legitimate self-interests of its respective stakeholders. I

would define these three offices as:

- the office of human resources (priestly office)
- the office of products & services (prophetic office)
- the office of financial resources (royal office)

A simple description of the defining characteristic of each office:

The Office of Human Resources is preoccupied with how the organization structures the character and quality of its life to meet the full range of needs of its workforce.

The Office of Products & Services is focused on the kind and quality of products and services provided reflecting how well in what way this organization justifies its existence.

The Office of Financial Resources is preoccupied with how the organization utilizes its resources so as to sustain its viability and balance the legitimate needs of each of its stakeholders and the wider community.

Together the three offices enable us to “see things whole” (Greenleaf) and in doing so reflect the character and spirit of the organization; its unique culture. Together they frame the context for any strategic thinking and action.

Recently I was reflecting on the Lenten scripture of Jesus’ transfiguration. I realized how little thought I have given to the meaning of transfiguration. So I went to C.H. Dodd’s for a definition. Dodd writes “To transfigure a situation is to bring the total situation as we... participate in it into a larger context which gives it new meaning”. In a sense I think this is what we are attempting in our model of reflection. By placing an organization in the larger context of the three-fold office of Christ and attempting to understand a particular organizational problem in the context of the core values of each “office” we are attempting to give it new meaning, or perhaps, more accurately, to enable the organization to discover a new meaning: to see things whole.

The model also invites participants to explore alternative ways of acting strategically, consistent with the core values of each office, by looking at the presenting problem through nine strategic lenses. The following describes how we have defined these lenses in the past:

The **Office of Human Resources** expresses itself through the strategic lenses of:

Celebrating: Acknowledging the truth of the situation so as to affirm and challenge.

Hosting: Providing an environment which nurtures, heals, encourages and empowers risk taking.

Modeling: Embodying the core values and vision in policies and practice

The **Office of Products and Services** expresses itself through the strategic lenses of:

Teaching: Sharing information and providing knowledge which empowers and illumines.

Critiquing: Being accountable through ongoing evaluation of performance to ensure excellence in service to the public.

Envisioning: Building a vision of service of the common good which taps into the life energy of the organization.

The **Office of Financial Resources** expresses itself through the strategic lenses of:

Building: Creating structures and systems which empower and sustain the capacity to serve.

Governing: Ensuring that all processes balance contending interests, enhance teamwork, and build accountability to all stakeholders.

Managing: Utilizing human, material and financial resources so as to fulfill its mission and steward those resources as a sustainable trust.

We are troubled by some of these definitions and descriptive titles and would invite your critical reflections and suggestions as you relate them to a specific organization with which you have experience. Those of you who worked with this model years ago may remember that these nine lenses were originally conceived as nine types of ministry reflecting each of the three offices.

At this moment they serve as a starting point for our research.