LOVING FAITHFUL INSTITUTIONS:
BUILDING BLOCKS OF A JUST GLOBAL SOCIETY

Postmodern Christians won't get very far in transforming society until they learn to love institutions again.

By Jonathan Chaplin

Institutions and organizations are out; networks and relationships are in—or so goes conventional "postmodern" wisdom on how to transform society, at least among those who hold out hope that societal transformation is still possible, who resist the despair implied in a consistent logic of deconstruction.

Yet I want to propose that a credible twenty-first century Christian voice on the theme of economy and hope needs to affirm *loving institutions* as key building blocks in any constructive response to our current economic and political malaise. To complicate this thesis, I also propose that Christians need to reckon with the fact that all institutions are in some sense faith-based, and that Christians should be unapologetic both about working to shape existing institutions from within according to their own vision of hope or, where necessary, founding their own institutions.

The current narrative favoured by many Christian progressives isn't very congenial toward these proposals. Institutions, so the story goes, are the classic instruments of social control generated by "modernity." Shaped according to the imperatives of

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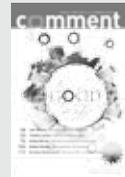
instrumental rationality and bureaucratic efficiency, they serve the interests of oppressive global capital—entrenching economic inequality, stifling human creativity, and suppressing dissent. They march toward their hegemonic goals regardless of the welfare of the people they purportedly exist to serve—those whom they promised to liberate from the supposed bondage, ignorance, and squalor of pre-industrial society.

But many critics now observe that modernity and its leading institutional bridgeheads are beginning to teeter. They point to deep fault lines appearing on the smooth surface of institutional bureaucracies and to new social formations emerging in the wings. To many people, the cumulative and interconnected failures of modernity—economic, political, environmental, and spiritual—seem to herald the decline of institutions and the arrival of new models of social

interaction rooted in open, dynamic relational networks. These networks, it is said, are flexible enough to adapt to ever-changing contexts, and spacious enough to allow human beings to continually redefine their identities and projects and to realize greater freedom and authenticity.

Some also claim—for example, heralds of the emergent church movement, or neo-Anabaptists—that the appearance of a network model of social change provides new openings for Christians to bear public witness. Breaking free from the constraints of mainstream institutions, Christians can join the "subaltern" flux on the margins of society, generate their own relational networks, and inject messages of hope (justice, peace, community, and so on) in the interstices of the current system. They can "speak truth to power" from a position of institutional powerlessness. The language of "bringing institutions under the Lordship of Christ" seems to such postmodern Christians like the controlling language of a dying Christendom.

That is, to say the least, an abridgement of a much more complex story (actually, a set of stories), but I hope it's not a complete caricature. And let me add that I actually agree with much of the critical analysis aimed toward the modernist characteristics of some of the institutions that have come to dominate the modern West—notably many transnational corporations, larger professional organizations, universities, and governmental bureaucracies: what even Peter Berger and

Richard Neuhaus (hardly postmodern progressives) dubbed thirty years ago the "megastructures" of society.

Because I intend this piece as a polemic—and in order to get something on the radar screens of Christian postmoderns—let me get this off my chest right away: many Christians who have been understandably, and often rightly, drawn to postmodern ways of thinking need to learn to love institutions again, and they won't get very far in transforming society unless they do. Such Christians also need to see that existing institutions, especially the larger ones, are already "faith-based." Contrary to the ruling secularist mindset, institutions like corporations, universities, government bureaucracies, and professional bodies are not devoid of faith-based influences; they merely deny their presence. The key questions, then, are these: which faith (or faiths) drives these institutions? And how can a biblically-inspired faith make any impact on them in a secular, plural society?

I'm obviously not saying that Christians must love modernist institutions as I've just depicted them: those kinds of institutions need to be resisted and reshaped in ways I'll gesture toward shortly. But if my sketch of a postmodern view of social formations is anywhere near being on target, then Christians, I'll suggest, have to move beyond a model of mere "dynamic relational networks" if they are to exercise the kind of cultural influence that actually advances justice and peace.

Consider some illustrations (they are only that) of why I think the relational networks model alone, useful corrective though it is, won't cut it. I'll start with the church itself. Christians drawn to postmodern thinking are also often attracted to new, "emergent" models of doing church. For the sake of the gospel, they claim, we must leave behind—or at least work around— mainstream denominational institutions, with their hierarchical authority structures, inflexible mission strategies, and lifeless antiquated liturgies.

I agree with much of that diagnosis. Yet history suggests that every authentic renewal movement in the church, if its unique gifts are to be passed on to succeeding generations and not die out with the first, will need to take on some durable institutional form at some point. Even the radical sixteenth-century Swiss Anabaptists emerging in reaction to the compromises of the "magisterial" reformer Zwingli would not have bequeathed their remarkable gifts of peace and toleration to the world, had Anabaptism not assumed denominational forms like that which became the Mennonite church.

One immediate implication of this suggestion is that ecclesial emergents should exploit every opportunity to transform existing defective denominational practices from within before launching out on a course that, however successful and intoxicating it is in the short run, may just result in yet another deficient denominational structure. Many Christians, I realize, are already busy with precisely that work of internal transformation.

My point, however, is that we can't "do church" in a long-term, transformative way unless we begin to crystallize and codify new mission initiatives within institutional structures, however leaner and fitter these structures may be than previous ones— they'll certainly need to be. This kind of institutionalization is what happened in the early church before its leadership started to go off the rails in a corrupting alliance with Roman imperial structures. I doubt we will be able to improve on their act today.

THE BASIC QUESTION RARELY ASKED

My main interest here, however, is how Christians can contribute to the generation of "loving, faithful" institutions outside the church, and to unpack that, I'll develop another illustration at greater length and use it as a platform for some broader statements.

Consider what has been happening in the corporate world over the last couple of decades. There we have witnessed, at least in certain sectors, a notable paradigm shift away from the traditional modernist model of bureaucratic, hierarchical, vertical-line management toward a model of horizontal, decentralized, participatory decision-making processes

in which employees are situated within networks and ceded much greater autonomy and flexibility.

This is all good, and may have led to increased worker satisfaction, and perhaps even to greater productivity. But as far as I can tell, this internal shift in management style has not made much difference in the way corporations conduct themselves outside the factory gates.

For example, I don't see much evidence that this shift has pushed corporations toward a change in their investment or growth priorities, modified their commitment to maximizing "shareholder value" as the overriding corporate goal, caused them to redesign their manipulative marketing strategies, or inspired them to redefine the reductionist indicators of efficiency and productivity on which they have hitherto relied. In other words, a network model of management hasn't been able to challenge the dominant "faith" in the corporate world, which is essentially a secular, utilitarian, and materialistic one.

Introducing a relational networks model may be a good thing as far as it goes, but it won't be enough to move large corporations closer to a genuine commitment to economic justice and solidarity. A much broader structural transformation is required; this will involve asking a basic question that is rarely asked in mainstream debate, and the answer to this question will be inescapably shaped by one faith perspective or another: what unique human purposes can business corporations properly serve, and how can they be (re)designed to serve them better? A Christian vision of economic life will have some distinctive things to say about that.

> *Christians should be unapologetic about shaping institutions from within, or founding their own institutions where necessary.*

Fleshing this out further will require that we imagine models of what normative business corporations within a globalizing twenty-first century would actually look like. And we won't get such models if we only continue to indulge in perpetual deconstructive critique. Instead, we need to take up (again, we won't be the first) the difficult, slow, unostentatious—and often unremarked upon—task of constructive institutional thinking and institution-(re)building.

Nor will we get normative business corporations if we suppose that the only suitable models are dusted-down medieval guilds or small-scale workers' cooperatives. Both of these have exemplary virtues, and I certainly wish there were more of the latter. But if greater economic justice and solidarity are to be achieved against the constraints of the mega-structural architecture of our globalizing society, we will need bigger players than that.

I'd add, however, that some big players started out as very small players indeed. The amazing Grameen Bank began its work in rural Bangladesh providing low-interest

micro-financing to groups of poor women, boasting repayment rates rivalling the biggest banks in the world. It won the Nobel Peace Prize in 2006. And while Grameen is not officially religious, it undoubtedly operates out of a very different economic faith than the mega-banks whose naive faith in mathematically sophisticated, short-term, profit-driven, risk-management investment strategies led the global financial system to the brink of collapse in 2008.

To transform the institutions that are shaping our globalized world, then, involves not only the deconstructive task of exposing their dehumanizing characteristics, but also the much more demanding constructive task of identifying their normative purposes and fleshing out how to advance these more adequately through specific and attainable institutional changes—tasks which will inevitably be decisively shaped by one faith or other.

Let me state my general point from a rather different angle by invoking some biblical terms: those who want to be prophets had better first immerse themselves in law and wisdom. This, of course, is what biblical prophets actually had to do before any of their fellow prophets would let them loose denouncing the idols of their time: most prophets weren't lone-rangers (the progressive equivalents of "one-man ministries") but tended to hang out in "schools." So, for example, everyone's all-time-favourite prophet Isaiah wouldn't have been able to come up with a denunciation like "woe to those who join house to house, who add field to field, until there is no more room" (5:8), unless he'd spent a lot of time "meditating on the law of the Lord"—from which he'd have learned (from sources like Leviticus 25) that economic activity Yahweh-style involves a legal guarantee of an equitable distribution of productive resources (i.e. land) for every Israelite family. Without the law of Jubilee—a cardinal component of the Covenant—how would any prophet have had the right to denounce the rich for the injustice of unlimited capital accumulation?

Prophecy is calling people back to covenant obedience, and the content of that obedience is laid out in the rich array of norms (or pathways) governing the social, economic, family, political, and religious life of Israel—norms that called for institutional embodiment and that pointed the way toward a common life of justice and solidarity (shalom). And while the people of God in the New Testament are no longer bound by the specific rules of ancient Israel, they are indeed bound by the "law of love," which, as Jesus and Paul both make clear, is the fulfillment not the abrogation of the law.

NO CRITICAL DISTANCE FROM REIGNING PARADIGMS

This, I hope, begins to sharpen the sense of what I mean by "loving institutions." I mean institutions that, even in limited ways, can embody the central norm of love, a norm which in turn needs to be fleshed

out in more specific directives about justice, solidarity, peace, stewardship, and so on. Our challenge is to work toward developing institutions that can serve as conduits of this kind of love, with all its differentiated concrete applications on the ground. Such institutions we should indeed learn to love. But they will be loving institutions only if they are directed by a faith that is responsive to the Creator's pathways for flourishing. One illustration of this task, I've been suggesting, is to develop faith-guided models of normative business corporations (rather than just lambasting the shortcomings of existing ones). This won't come easy. It will require a combination of extensive practical experience with the business world at many levels and extensive knowledge of the traditions of Christian-inspired social and economic reflection. Without the resources of business entrepreneurs, theologians, philosophers, or ethicists can fulminate against "oppressive global capitalism" until the cows come home, but Christian business practitioners will not give them the time of day.

Yet without the resources of the traditions of Christian social thought, the result will be similar to what I have all too often encountered from business students, even at Christian colleges. From their accounts, it becomes clear that their business professors often have neither the training nor the inclination to take any real critical distance from the reigning secular, utilitarian, liberal economic paradigms in their field. And the result of that deficiency is that generations of

young Christian businesspeople will be sent out into the world of work thinking that the currently dominant structure of the business corporation is already normative from a Christian point of view. Some of these young businesspeople may turn out to be generous benefactors to Christian causes, but few will be transformers of the corporate sector in the direction of an economy of hope, justice, and solidarity.

I've dwelt on just one example of a large social institution that needs to be reckoned with and transformed if we are to nurture hope of greater justice and solidarity. But my point applies to all types and sizes of institutions.

One could, for example, run the analysis through political institutions; let me briefly discuss how it could go. The conclusion would be similar: we need to develop creative models of what normative governmental structures might look like. Equally, such models need to be forged out of dialogue between seasoned political practitioners—public officials, elected politicians, but also civil society leaders and grassroots campaigners—and Christian political theorists or political theologians.

Such discussions would need to ask some tough questions, starting with the kind of question theorists like me love to spend lots of time on: What is the normative purpose of the state in classical Christian thought? But these discussions also need to go beyond that, asking how our existing
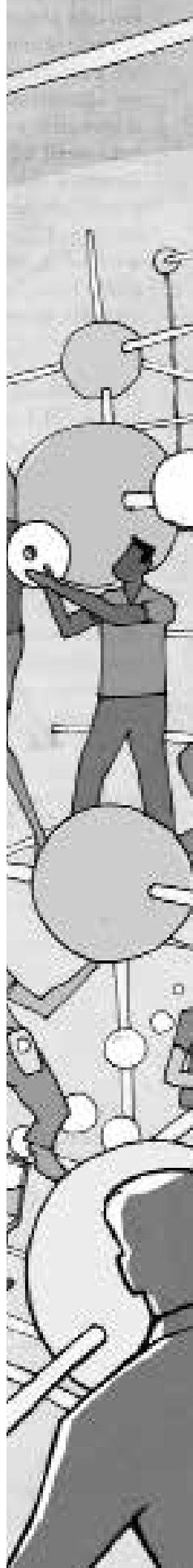
labyrinthine, lumbering, bureaucratic administrative structures can be incrementally restructured to enhance citizen participation rather than kill it off. This is the kind of question theorists like me would love other people to spend lots of time on. Proposals for such incremental changes at the margins of our current systems probably won't sound very prophetic; they'll be more sapiential (wisdom-based) in tone. It's certainly a lot more fun to declare to a sympathetic academic audience that "our dehumanizing modernist bureaucracies must be replaced by human-sized communities of reciprocity," than to propose to a skeptical audience of government officials that "health care cost centres should devolve control of budgets to local stakeholder boards."

Sometimes I sit in those academic gatherings and I think they have some value. But lasting institutional transformation will only emerge out of piecemeal, normally below-the-radar moves by principled practitioners advancing ideas like the one I mentioned, but who yet are guided by a larger, faith-inspired vision of justice and solidarity.

I am encouraged to see that there are many more budding sapiential institution-transformers active in British political life than there were a generation ago. I think of a prominent politician, John Battle, who, drawing deeply on the legacy of Catholic social teaching, works tirelessly as a passionate and articulate champion for many disadvantaged people living in his parliamentary constituency in Leeds, England. Such

institution-transformers also exist in the corporate sector. I think of my friend Cal Bailey, the marketing and sustainability director of a medium-sized construction company (also in Leeds), who, inspired by a robust Christian vision, is doing his level best on a daily basis to edge this most wasteful of industries toward greater environmental responsibility. Such people do not receive enough honour within our churches, and they are not helped by theologians who simply demonize the modern state or capitalism and all their works without pointing toward attainable alternatives. Notwithstanding the brilliance and originality of theologian John Milbank, this is a charge that can be levelled against his own writing— though it is encouraging that some writers associated with the Radical Orthodoxy movement (for example, Phillip Blond) are beginning to take up the challenge of devising constructive alternatives.

Let me conclude, first by calling attention to the rich historical resources Christians have at their disposal as they take up this challenge, and second, by recognizing the contexts of secularism and pluralism in which they do so.

POST-SECULAR INSTITUTIONS

Christians who aspire to transform institutions will certainly require great gifts of courage, imagination, and innovation. Yet at the same time, they will also need to rediscover the deep veins of traditional Christian insight into the nature and

purposes of institutions in order then to critically reappropriate and rearticulate such insight for the radically new challenges of globalizing twenty-first-century societies. As the Brazos Press strapline puts it, they'll need to find ways of bringing "the tradition alive." And "the tradition" must be read to include not just the intellectual tradition but also the legacy of the practical witness of the saints. Here I mean not just those whom the church has officially venerated as such, but all faithful believers from all walks of life and all ages who have left behind durable, concrete institutional embodiments of love—schools, hospitals, political movements, and yes, business enterprises—that can still speak to and inspire us today as we seek to be faithful witnesses to the gospel in the challenging context of a globalizing but fragile twenty-first-century world.

But what are the prospects for developing "faith-based" institutional proposals or models in a context so deeply penetrated by, on the one hand, secularist modes of thought (such as economic utilitarianism) and, on the other, a deepening pluralism of faiths? One of the striking—and at the same time disorienting—features of our current situation is that the latter is actually opening up spaces to resist the former: pluralism is undermining secularism. The growing recognition that no single faith perspective is able any longer to dominate public institutional life isn't only corroding what's left of Christian triumphalism, it's also problematizing the two-centuries-old secularist presumption of a sole entitlement

to shape the terms of modern institutional life. Combined with the creeping erosion of the modernist project that is driving our larger institutions, the experience of pluralism is now beginning to crack open the door through which we can glimpse the possibility of a new, post-secular institutional settlement.

Lasting institutional transformation will only emerge out of piecemeal, unostentatious labour.

In such a settlement, the classic institutions of modernity—corporations, universities, governments—will no longer be able to get away with presenting themselves, unchallenged, as guided exclusively by secular, objective, universal standards of rationality and as reliable guarantors of progress. The influence of contestable and contested faiths on their mode of operation will be increasingly evident, leaving space for alternative faith perspectives to make their distinctive contributions. These contributions could be made from within existing institutions, formerly marginalized voices now acknowledged as worthy of hearing. They'd appear as, for example, courses on Christian or Buddhist perspectives on health care in mainstream public universities or as so-called "sharia-compliant" financial instruments offered by leading banks. (These already exist—but why are there no Torah-compliant ones yet?) Or they could be mounted from the platform of distinct institutions: openly faith-based social investment companies, credit unions, environmentally-friendly

mining enterprises, property developers committed to social housing, fair-traded food co-ops, and so on.

These faith-based contributions should not, however, speak in tribal theological languages unintelligible to the wider public with whom they must address and engage. Yet neither will they merely mimic the dated secular Esperanto that liberal secularists would still like to impose on the rest of us. In striking the right tone and content, they will be guided by communicative guidelines such as the following.

First, a great deal of faith-inspired language, especially Christian language spoken in Western or Western-influenced societies, is already perfectly intelligible to secular-minded people, and sometimes we need to call secularists' bluff when they feign deafness in the presence of religiously inflected language. When Desmond Tutu called for the end of apartheid because "every human being is made in the image of God," he didn't have secularists scratching their heads in puzzlement. In this sense, faith-inspired language can be "public" if the audience has already been historically shaped by the relevant faith.

Second, to secure support in a mixed public audience for a proposal to reform a particular institution (e.g., a corporation, university, or government), it is normally prudent, to say the least, to frame the proposal in terms of the subject matter of that institution (e.g., production, knowledge, or law) rather than to lead with one's explicit faith language (e.g., blessing, revelation, or judgment). Such language will certainly be "public" because the subject matter in question is public. Yet it will not thereby have become "secular" or "neutral," at least so long as its content remains continually fed by its deeper faith-based sources. There may be Desmond Tutu moments when our faith inspiration has to rise to the surface, but they'll probably be the exception. The norm is more likely to be the principled practitioner I cited earlier, working below the radar in government and speaking in a sapiential register but guided by a larger vision of faith.

Finally, Christians will seek to be those, on the one hand, who stand ready to declare the "reasons for the hope that is within them" when the opportunity arises or the occasion demands, and those, on the other hand, whose words are "seasoned with salt"—committed to truth, winsome in tone, inviting of dialogue, hopeful of agreement.

And the prospects for success? That's a modernist question. ◘

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