

“Nuts and Bolts” (II): Reflecting on the Governance Review Group Report

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Nuts and bolts have a history. Something very like these were used in the hanging Gardens of Babylon, apparently. Jacques Besson, a French inventor, created the first bolt and screw manufacturing machine in 1568, and also made a screw-cutting plate for use with lathes. This was later perfected and manufactured by an English company, Hindley of York. In the eighteenth century, clockmakers were the principle users of nuts and bolts. But it was not until 1841 that Joseph Whitworth, a British toolmaker, and his American counterpart, William Sellers, had proposed a standardized thread system. It was the English metallurgist Sir Henry Bessemer (from 1856 to 1876) who produced the very first cheap mild steel in large quantities.

Most key policy areas in the church today are governed not by theological leadership and vision, but by management. True, in some ways leadership is a process similar to management. Leadership entails working with people; so does management. Leadership is concerned with effective goal accomplishment; so is management. But whereas the study of leadership can be traced back to Aristotle and Plato, management science only emerged around the turn of the 20th century with the advent of advanced industrialized society. Management was created as a means of reducing chaos in organizations, to make them run more efficiently and effectively.

The primary functions of management – identified by Henri Fayol (1916) – were planning, organizing, staffing and controlling. These functions are still representative of management, and they lie behind the *Governance Review Group Report*. Fayol worked for one of the largest producers of iron and steel in France. He became its managing director in 1888, when the mine company employed over 10,000 people. Fayol realized that the goal of management was to serve processes that produced predictable results. We make round pegs to fit round holes; square for square. Management eliminates rough edges. Any creative friction tolerated will have to be subordinate to the processes and their goals. So, management will not have a vision for an organic institution, where the wrong shapes might eventually meld together, or even ultimately make something better. As with management, so with the church, perhaps?

The church, as a form of social polity, was always meant to be for others. Like God, Christ and the Holy Spirit, 'church' is not yours or mine. It is for all, and belongs to all. It is a shared enterprise, built on profound notions of charity, reciprocity, giving, receiving and grace and the common good. It is an organic body, not a machine comprising nuts and bolts. The organic motifs the New Testament attaches to concepts of the church are no accident. Bodies with bolts attached only summon images of Frankenstein's monster.

As a sometime lecturer and tutor at the Saïd Business School at the University of Oxford, here's a question I ask MBA students: "What is the oldest constitution in the world that people still live by today?". Given that this module is about governance and leadership, students are intrigued. Many students approaching this assume it might be somehow British – the mother of all parliaments, and all that. Some braver souls suggest Iceland – that is the world's very first parliament, by the way, formed in 930 AD - the *Althing*. But no, it is not that either. The answer is *The Rule of Benedict*, written around 540. So yes, catholic, European, and designed to regulate life and how we live together.

Benedict's *Rule* begins with a simple word: 'hearken', or 'listen' – and goes on to tell us that if we want to lead a body or a group, we must first of all *attend* to it: attentive listening, patiently tuned-in. It advocates charity, compassion, grace, hospitality, hope, holiness. It preaches regard and respect for neighbours, and for the poor. It tells us how to live together, despite our differences.

The essay I then set on the basis of this is straightforward: 'write a book review on a text that teaches us about leadership'. But there's a catch. You can only write a review of a book that has been in continuous print for at least 300 years. This cuts out all the modern dross at a stroke – those tiresome books at airport bookshops that brashly claim to be the latest fad and breakthrough in leadership studies or management theory. They are all barred from this exercise. So what can you write on? Well, Machiavelli's *Prince*. Shakespeare's tragedies such as *Lear* or *Macbeth*; both have plenty to say on leadership, as do his comedies. As well as Benedict's *Rule*, there is also Gregory's *Pastoral Rule* - the textbook on how to be a bishop, translated by Alfred the Great – mostly unknown to and unread by today's bishops.

Elliott Jacques in his *A General Theory of Bureaucracy*, (London: Heinemann, 1976) argued that churches were an 'association', and clergy 'members', not its employees. He argued that once clergy come to be regarded as employees in a manager-subordinate relationship, congregations become customers, and the sacred bond between laity and clergy becomes broken, and turned into one of consumer-provider. Jacques specifically praised those churches that promoted life tenure for clergy, because it guarded against centralized managerial interference, and protected the deep communal and personal ethos of the clergy-laity bond. Overt central control and monitoring by churches, argued Jacques, slowly destroyed local spiritual life, because the clergy would be subject to demands on two fronts. Namely, those targets and priorities set remotely by central management, and the local consumerist demands of congregations. The combination would erode public-pastoral ministry to the whole parish, with the clergy becoming demoralized and alienated.

In her prescient book M. Thung, *The Precarious Organization: Sociological Explorations of the Church's Mission and Structure* (The Hague: Mouton & Co., 1976). the Dutch ecclesiologist Mady Thung suggests that national churches in northern Europe have come under increasing pressure in the post-war years to become 'organizations' – 'nervous activity and hectic programmes...constantly try(ing) to engage' members in an attempt to reach 'non-members'. She contrasts the 'organizational' model and its frenetic activism with the 'institutional' model of the church – the latter offering, instead, contemplative, aesthetic and liturgical frameworks, that take longer to grow, are often latent for significant periods of time, but she argues, may be more culturally resilient and conducive than an activist-organizational model.

There is an irony in this. The church is clearly trying to become organized, and act like a good organization should be in the modern world. Its problem is that it is largely a voluntary association, run by volunteers, and who are under few obligations to abide by rules, regulations and codes of compliance. Or, the volunteers may simply lack the will and desire to be organized. Or, the voluntary codes are simply inadequate when tested for robustness. Moreover, the churches have depleting resources, and the greater the demand for standardized forms of organization becomes, the more the churches are likely to fail and default on basic minimum standards of compliance.

So the churches find themselves increasingly failing as organizations, but unable to recover their identities as public utilities and value-based institutions. Their authority is undermined as a consequence. In terms of bureaucracy, we can express the matter succinctly:

“Any social order is a tissue of authorities. In contemporary society these authorities range from the mild and provident authority of a mother over her infant to the absolute, unconditional, and imprescriptible authority of the national state. Some system or pattern of authority is involved in any continuing social aggregate. The moment two or more persons find themselves in a relationship that involves, in whatever degree of informality or formality, the distribution of responsibilities, duties, needs, privileges, and rewards, a pattern of authority is present”. (R. A. Nisbet, *The Social Bond*, New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1970, p. 113).

Thus, social expectations of what it means to be ‘public’ may now be at such variance with where the churches are, to such an extent that the authority and identity of the churches are now undermined by their failure to be well organized, and the institution recognizably compliant, transparent and accountable. (NB: the word ‘public’ gets more than a dozen mentions the report, but over half refer to the fretting the church does over its public image, and not the church listening to the public, or being a public body). With such defensive responses we are too deferential to the power of bishops and their alleged capacity to organise and lead. I actually don’t think we want any more from our bishops than exemplary care, teaching, compassion and goodness.

But congregations perhaps trust this assumption far more than is really wise. In the absence of arguments and evidence from episcopal lips, assurances and assertions from bishops often carry too much weight. Many assume bishops to be almost omniscient. Yet, there must be significant doubts about their competencies in areas that they have had little if any professional training in. Bishops, because they are bishops, often retain positions of ‘oversight’ in fields they simply do not comprehend: education, safeguarding, public policy – to name but a few. They often feel the need to defend their comprehensiveness and role in such oversight, even when it is manifestly the case that they are out of their depth, or sometimes just plain wrong.

All too often, exposure of any weakness, failure or wrongdoing is met with defensive assertions and reassertions. They can sometimes keep digging themselves deeper into the very holes they inadvertently created. We see this very clearly on issues of gender and sexuality, and latent in ethnicity and disability. The Bishops are committed to tepid politics and theologies of equality, so the very people who are sexist, racist or homophobic are given platforms, preference and status.

But the church – and the Bible – whilst teaching that all are of equal value, espouses theologies and politics of liberation, not equality. Slaves, Greeks and women who belonged to the very early church were not accommodated on condition that they accepted their oppression. The radical adjustments had to be made by those who had power and privileges. They had to see their social subordinates as set free: liberated. So whilst the Bishops wrestle with how to keep everything levelled-down and equal, the voices of protest and liberation are suffocated. To be clear, feminism began not as a movement for equality, but as one of freedom. The truth sets us free; it does not exist to make us bound to stifling equality.

The Church is a sacred space, but also a public space. It is not a private sect. Ceding power and authority to wider society and to regulators and overseers with appropriate competencies would represent a significant shift in ecclesial polity. It would require the giving away of power in order to protect ecclesial authority in the areas that matter: mission, ministry, doctrine and pastoral care. Where the church is ministering in public ways, it must learn to accept new standards in public life, and the authority of these. If the churches try and evade their responsibility here, they will lose their authority.

So can the Church of England now be reimagined all over again, and streamlined into being some lean, on-message organization, efficiently run? I doubt it. If diversity of belief and practice in the church could be so easily managed, we might have expected the New Testament to say so. It doesn't. It is the vanity of our age to suppose the Church is just like an organization in which diversity can be smoothed over; the faithful warily kettled into some false compliance manufactured by its leaders; difficulties managed and controlled; and the Church pasteurized so as to become a body of utterly consistent clarity.

If all our churches are now merely for a small, depleting group of activist members, who simply want to go on perpetual recruitment drives, then congregations and Christian faith will further deteriorate. What we need now – through prescient public theology – is some serious conversation and debate about how our churches can reclaim their identity as proper public forms of social polity. There is another concept of the church to rediscover and re-inhabit here. It is nothing less than the church finding itself as, Dan Hardy (1930-2007) once described, as “the social-transcendent” or the “social skin” of the world: sensate, receptive, easily bruised...but also soft and feeling.

So, as for the *Governance Review Group Report*, I hope it will be noted by General Synod, but then filed. If God is truly the first cause of the church, and gives us the values from which all mission, governance and good structures flow, then we will quietly forget this report. For we will have remembered what we lost along the way. God Matters. First and last. Jesus sets an example of fearless care and reckless love. The Holy Spirit leads us into all truth. We are on Jesus’ journey, not ours. From this, we might discover why we are created and redeemed, what we are here for, and meant to do with this treasure within these cracked earthenware pots. This is our purpose.

Christ’s life and ministry is how the church is called to be an incorporative body that expresses the life of the Kingdom of Heaven, which is ultimately reconciling all things to God. To paraphrase Bishop John Robinson (1919-1983), all the church was ever meant to be was the constructor’s hut on God’s building site, which is the world. Christians today assume, all too easily, that God’s primary concern lies with the church. But God is building a kingdom in the world – a prophetic polity rooted in super-abundant justice, liberation and compassion. Our churches are merely ‘transitory temples’ to achieve these ends. Churches are not God’s final goal. They are rather, simply a means to God’s own ends.

It is surely time to reclaim the priority of God’s polity in our governance and the mission and ministries of our churches. To borrow that over-used word from the *Governance Review Group*, putting God first would be something that is truly “appropriate” for this church.