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Ministry, Management, and the Ecumenical Movement

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Moses—

Aaron, O what have you done?

Aaron—

Nothing different,
Just my task as it ever has been:
When your idea gave forth no word,
my word gave forth no image for them.
I worked marvels for eyes and ears to
witness.

Moses—

Commanded by whom?

Aaron—

As always,
I heeded the voice from within.¹

The ecumenical movement in contemporary America should not be surprised to find itself in a quandary of questions regarding the “ministry” of the gospel. From the first decades following the ascension of Jesus until the present the whole complex of emerging questions of ministry have been intimately bound up with society-wide crises of authority.²

While it is nearly impossible to sort out the myriad questions regarding ministry that have arisen in the American context, one factor in particular has and, if left unchecked, will continue to subvert the ministry of the gospel: a society-wide managerial mode of authority. This managerial mode of authority has increasingly been permeating Western life for a century and claims to have “worked marvels for eyes and ears to witness.” It has smuggled itself into the

¹From Arnold Schoenberg’s opera “Moses and Aaron,” as translated in Karl H. Wörner, *Schoenberg’s ‘Moses and Aaron’* (London: Faber and Faber, 1959) 183-4; cited in Thomas G. Long’s editorial, “Moses, Aaron, and Practical Theology,” *Theology Today* 42 (April 1985) 1.

²Edward Schillebeeckx, *Ministry* (New York: Crossroad, 1984); and Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, *In Memory of Her* (New York: Crossroad, 1983).

praxis of the ministry through the cultural back door. “As always” Aaron’s “voice from within” gets there from without, often by stealth. It has intruded into all expressions of the ministry and operates like a wedge in the ongoing dialectic between the ministry of the whole people of God

and those within the whole people who exercise an ordained office.

Edward Schillebeeckx notes: “The critical point—in every sense of the phrase—is whether the practice of the ministry...is formed from theological reflection on new human and cultural situations.”³ In this article I shall shine some light on the back door of the contemporary practice of the ministry of the gospel, a door jimmied open by the managerial intruder. I shall proceed first by highlighting the historical period when modern managerial philosophy initially entered into the ecumenical picture; second, I shall trace the growing consciousness within ecumenism that the practice of ministry encompasses issues of church structure and managerial authority; and third, I shall investigate the links between contemporary social images of authority and the managerial mode. In a final part I shall suggest that the contours of a theological prognosis for the practice of ministry in a managerial age will focus upon an evangelical mode of authority. Evangelical authority can subordinate the society-wide managerial mode in such a way that the necessary tasks of management that do exist within the church can be accomplished without colonizing the church’s life together.

I. THE ENTRANCE

In 1893 the influential church historian Philip Schaff issued a clarion call before the World’s Parliament of Religions at the Chicago World’s Fair for “federal union.” This seemed the most realizable way for the churches to make an immediate impact on societal ills. Elias Stanford took the vision and began to translate the vision into reality. This led to the formation of the Federal Council of the Churches of Christ in America in 1908, the precursor to the National Council of Churches.

Historically the first phase of the entrance of the managerial mode of authority into the pluralistic church goes back to that period when both modern managerial philosophy and the contemporary American ecumenical movement were gaining a foothold. Arthur M. Schlesinger, Sr., drew attention to the last quarter of the nineteenth century as “a critical period in American religion.”

Biological evolutionary theory was challenging religion’s system of thought, and urban and industrial development was challenging religion’s social program. Sidney Mead augmented Schlesinger’s thesis by adding “scientific modernism” as a third factor that emerged during this period. Scientific modernism was challenging American religion’s system of thought particularly in regard to biblical studies. However, the scientific modernism of the late nineteenth cen-

³E. Schillebeeckx, *Ministry*, 2.

ture had another side to it, an organizational-ecclesiastical side that still holds a balloon mortgage on the ecclesiological future of ministry.⁴

The rapid social changes of the late nineteenth century brought about by industrialization and urban growth acted as the fertile soil for a new religious movement in America referred to as the social gospel. The social gospel took root among those nineteenth-century Protestants who had endorsed postmillennial ideals. These people were more optimistic in regard to the possibility of transforming the social world before the return of Christ than were those who had held the terrestrially pessimistic ideals of premillennial Protestant traditions. These postmillennial ideals found a resonating voice within another fledgling American movement, this

one within academia.

At the birth of American sociology lay the strong belief that the forces that shaped the rapid social changes in society were not as “natural” and “inevitable” as Herbert Spencer’s Social Darwinism had claimed. The first place among the most prominent dissenters to Social Darwinism goes to Lester Frank Ward, the founder of sociology in America. Ward’s one great idea was that people were not at the mercy of, but rather were the masters of, both nature and society, and that all progress was to be achieved by controlling the social forces. This control should be built upon scientific principles analogous to the natural sciences and should take the form of a “sociocracy,” a *scientifically planned and managed democracy*.⁵

While Ward, an atheist, had little direct contact with the theologians of the social gospel movement, he did exercise an indirect influence on them through his followers. A number of his followers in the fledgling sociology departments of America’s universities were Christians. These “Christian sociologists”—people like Albion Small, Edward Ross, and the economist Richard Ely—not only talked social gospel theory with the theologians at the World’s Parliament of Religion, but they also shaped the early years of the *American Journal of Sociology*. The early years of this prestigious journal were devoted partially to a dialogue between sociologists like Ward and theologians with a sociological bent. Shailer Mathews, theologian at the University of Chicago from 1894-1933 and dean of its divinity school for twenty-five years, was a key participant in such interchanges as well as an articulate interpreter of the social gospel. Along with others at the University of Chicago, he explored ways to couple sociological approaches with theology.

In the context of our investigation, Mathews’ influence is felt most keenly in his involvement with the ecumenical movement and particularly in his leadership capacity during the early years of the Federal Council. He helped to introduce the managerial mode to the pluralistic churches when he emerged as president of the Federal Council in 1912, the same year that he published his

⁴Arthur M. Schlesinger, Sr., “A Critical Period in American Religion,” *Religion in American History*, ed. John M. Mulder and John F. Wilson (Englewood Cliffs: Prentice-Hall, 1978) 302-3; Sidney E. Mead, *The Lively Experiment* (New York: Harper & Row, 1963) 173-4; Ben Primer, in his *Protestants and American Business Methods* (Ann Arbor: UMI Research Press, 1979), is the only church historian who has pursued a full-blown examination of this development.

⁵Lester Frank Ward, “Politico-social Functions,” *The Penn Monthly* 12.137 (May 1881) 321-36; idem, *Outlines of Sociology* (New York: Macmillan, 1898) which contains twelve articles written for the *American Journal of Sociology*, 1895-97.

Scientific Management of the Churches (Chicago: University of Chicago, 1912). Even though Mathews played a leading role during the early years of this development, there was a broad-based social movement supporting this introduction of managerial philosophy and practice into Protestantism.⁶

II. A GROWING ECUMENICAL CONSCIOUSNESS

The ecumenical movement in the United States took a new turn during the 1950s with a renewed interest in “organic union.” This groundswell culminated in Eugene Carson Blake’s now famous sermon at Christ Church Cathedral in San Francisco on December 3, 1960. There was a

conviction that the unity among Christians for which Christ prayed should be a unity that is not merely spiritually experienced by believers but a manifest reality that is apprehensible even by those who are not Christian. Blake's sermon gave birth to the Consultation on Church Union (COCU) that has continued to have "organic union" as its normative *raison d'être* for the participating denominations.

COCU's early years brought great hopes that the traditional denominational barriers would be rather quickly transcended over ten to fifteen years. However, as the Consultation began to delve more deeply into the matter of "authorized ministry" it became apparent that it had entered into contested terrain. The landscape encompassed issues of power, authority, decision making, and church structure. It gradually became clear to COCU that the issues of authorized ministry and church structure were closely coupled with the new society-wide issues that surfaced in the sixties and seventies—racism, sexism, and handicapism. It would no longer be "so easy to distinguish the 'theological' from the 'non-theological' factors as has been thought in the past."⁷

Traditionally, it was thought that the lines of division that prevented union were drawn vertically between the denominations. The COCU process revealed that some notable lines of division in American Protestantism cut laterally across all the denominations. The achievement of a traditional kind of "organic union" would only perpetuate the already-existing, deep lateral divisions. An ecclesiological crisis of authority had fermented beneath the surface during the twentieth century and had permeated most of the denominations.

During the 1950s the global ecumenical movement became conscious of a similar situation. The North American Conference on Faith and Order in 1957 at Oberlin, Ohio, represents a benchmark in coming to grips with the essentially theological nature of the questions of church structure and decision-making authority. This discovery spilled over into the discussions that took place at the Third Assembly of the World Council of Churches at New Delhi in 1961 and continued to influence ecumenical theology for a number of years. In 1963 the Lutheran theologian Nils Ehrenstrom observed: "One thing is clear. There is need for a theological rehabilitation of the institutional, organizational, and ad-

⁶See B. Primer, *Protestants and American Business Methods*.

⁷Paul Harrison, "Sociological Analysis of the Participative Communion," *Mid-Stream* 2 (June 1963) 97.

ministrative structures of the Church."⁸ At the World Conference of Church and Society held at Geneva in 1966 the impact of Third World liberation movements helped to focus social ethics on issues of decision-making power and authority.

In 1979 a conference was convened at Massachusetts Institute of Technology around the formula "toward a just, sustainable and participatory society." Regarding a participatory society the MIT conference stated:

From most parts of the world today, there comes a cry of people who want to participate in making the decisions that affect them. The cry comes from individuals and from groups: from racial and ethnic groups long kept out of power, from women in male-dominated societies, from youth, from the aged, from labor unions, from the poor. In the international arena, it comes from nations

which feel dominated by great powers or “super powers.”⁹

At this conference the burgeoning managerial mode of authority was identified as a “new form of domination” that subverts the possibility for a participatory society and church.

On the American front, Richard G. Hutcheson, Jr., has given an insightful account of the development of the managerial mode in the Protestant churches since World War II. This development culminated with the managerial restructuring of several Protestant denominations in the late sixties and early seventies. Hutcheson’s own involvement in this development left him with deep-seated feelings of dissonance. “In the managerial age, *leaders* seem to have been replaced by *managers*.” This represents “a real stumbling block” in the church because “the essence of management is control.” For this reason the managerial mode of authority remains “ill equipped to fill the role of the savior of the church.”¹⁰ Yet, this salvific pretense runs deep in managerial philosophy and, if left unattended, can degenerate into a supposed golden age, an ecclesiological managerial millennialism.

III. AUTHORITY AND THE MANAGERIAL MODE

The collision of the managerial mode of authority with the wide-spread and deep-rooted cry of people longing to participate in the decisions that shape their lives shows up in the crisis of the mega-images of authority that underlie American society. Richard Sennett offers a powerful analysis of two mega-images of authority.¹¹ “Paternalism” as one of the foundations of our social life functions as an image of “an authority of false love.” Paternalistic authority is a way to love because it cares for others. It is a “false love” because it cares for others only insofar as this care serves the authority’s own purposes. Paternalistic authority cares solely for its own purposes because it has only one-way skin. Care can get out, but the needs of those cared for are never heard. It always

⁸Nils Ehrenstrom, “The Quest for Ecumenical Institutionalization,” *Institutionalism and Church Union*, ed. Nils Ehrenstrom and Walter G. Muelder (New York: Association Press, 1963) 34-5.

⁹Paul Albrecht, *Faith and Science in an Unjust World* (2 vols.; Geneva: World Council of Churches, 1980) 27.

¹⁰Richard G. Hutcheson, Jr., *Wheel Within the Wheel: Confronting the Management Crisis in the Pluralistic Church* (Atlanta: John Knox, 1979) 163-64, 44, 19.

¹¹Richard Sennett, *Authority* (New York: Vintage Books, 1981).

assumes that it knows what is best for the other because there is no reciprocal interchange between the authority and the other. Paternalistic care is intended as love but results in domination.

“Autonomy” is the second mega-image of authority that undergirds American social life. Autonomy is the Renaissance dream of being self-possessed, a dream of personal mastery that is rare and thus commands respect. Unlike paternalism, autonomous authority lets the needs of others be raised and appears to listen. However, it is thick skinned. Because autonomous authority is self-possessed, it is unaffected by what it hears. It too has only one-way skin. The very subtlety of its self-possessed strength intimidates and dominates, and there is no reciprocal interchange between the authority and the other. It is an authority “without love.” Autonomous authority increasingly is challenging paternalistic authority as the fundamental, deep structure of

the managerial mode of existence. The gradual ascendancy of autonomy over paternalism offers no real cause for rejoicing. As an even more subtle form of domination, autonomy only serves to solidify the hegemony of the managerial mode of existence in contemporary social life.

Jürgen Habermas has persuasively analyzed the growing crisis that the managerial mode of authority has brought on social life in the West.¹² He has highlighted the managerial mode's "functional necessity" of making itself as far as possible autonomous from the legitimating structures of social life, that is, from the public arenas that extend value and meaning. By creating "maneuvering room" for itself the managerial mode of authority can more effectively control the steering mechanisms of a social group. Those who advocate for the managerial mode do so under the smokescreen of a supposed realism regarding the "accelerated growth of complexity" of modern society. Only those with managerial moxie—and supposed neutrality and objectivity—can sort out this complexity and rearrange it *efficiently* for the benefit of society as a whole. Anyone who advocates for the intensive and engaged participation of all who would be affected by a decision in the decision-making process would "make a principle of frustration." The managerial mode of authority considers the cry of people for participation to be the epitome of modern irrationalism.

The crisis in the modern West results from the structurally inherent contradictions between the managerial mode of authority and the counter-cries of those longing to participate in the decisions that shape their lives. This crisis undermines the structures of public life as well as the individual identity of responsible subjects. Both Sennett and Habermas argue that the cries of those longing to participate are a critically integral component for structures of authority that are "visible, legible" (Sennett) and "communicative" (Habermas). From their respective viewpoints these kinds of public structures of authority would be the basis for a just, caring, and enduring society that is also capable of providing a healthy milieu for individual identity formation.

¹²Jürgen Habermas, *Legitimation Crisis* (Boston: Beacon, 1975).

IV. TOWARD A THEOLOGICAL PROGNOSIS

This investigation so far has been primarily diagnostic. At this point I would like to sketch out the theological contours of a gospel-grounded prognosis for the praxis of ministry within the contemporary context of a managerial age.

1. Sennett and Habermas offer powerful and complementary analyses of the crisis that the managerial mode of authority engenders. Their analyses provide the ecumenical churches with a new angle from which to view the persistent and heretofore unresolved issues of ministry, church structure, and authority. However, their prognoses cannot be uncritically appropriated as the way that the church should go in order to remedy its situation. There are internal limits to their proposals, and the church does in fact have theological resources that can transcend these limits.

Alvin Gouldner, a social theorist who stands sympathetically within the same tradition as Habermas, has astutely investigated the cultural shape that Habermas's proposal takes as it becomes embedded in social structures. Gouldner notes that structures that communicatively embrace the cries of those longing to participate form a culture of critical discourse. This global culture is realistically based upon a principle, process, and praxis of critique and self-critique due to the universality of internal contradictions. While this culture "may also be the best card that history has presently given us to play," especially in comparison with the hegemony of the

managerial mode of authority, Gouldner urges “no celebration.”¹³

Gouldner’s diagnosis has an uncanny affinity to the Reformation teaching that the “law always accuses.” Like this Reformation trajectory Gouldner projects a deep sense throughout his work that life cannot be lived without the law’s critical process, and yet in the law’s fullness, up close and personal, life cannot be lived with it either. It is this character of the law that makes Christ and his evangelical authority so necessary, especially for the church that takes the law with ultimate seriousness.

2. Theologians Robert Bertram and Robert Jenson have succinctly made the case that the issue of church polity and structure is “the very archetype of a theological task.”¹⁴ They help to clarify the place and limits of the church’s legal authority and the subordinate and thereby proper role that it plays with reference to evangelical authority. Through this legal-evangelical dialectic the gospel can so capture the law that it can enlist the law’s authority for its own evangelical purposes. The gospel’s own participatory thrust based upon its *sola fide* focus can surpass the law’s limitations without losing the law’s (from Habermas’s and Sennett’s perspectives) participatory and critical trajectory. Church structures, because they are the church’s, should reflect this participatory dynamic not only for legal reasons but finally for evangelical reasons.

3. Michael Root looks to the New Testament and to the post-apostolic church in order to make the theological connection between an office of the

¹³Alvin W. Gouldner, *The Dark Side of the Dialectic* (2 vols.; New York: Seabury, 1979) 2. 7-8.

¹⁴Robert Jenson, “Sovereignty in the Church,” *The New Church Debate*, ed. Carl Braaten (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1983) 41; and Robert Bertram, “Confessing the Faith of the Church,” in the same volume, pp. 123-37.

ministry and a broad-based, participatory ecclesial community.¹⁵ The biblical precedence of a dialectical give-and-take between ministerial leadership and the wider community should be normative for present day church structures. Root’s perspective can be bolstered by focusing on a potent Reformation trajectory that makes a similar point with particular attention to the office of bishop. Numbered among the “conflicts with the Gospel” is a bishop’s unwillingness “to be judged by the church or by anybody.”¹⁶ Unfortunately, the ecumenical movement’s much-touted *Baptism, Eucharist, and Ministry* comes up painfully short precisely on this give-and-take between the office of the bishop and the wider Christian community.¹⁷

In a managerial age an absence of church structures that grow out of the evangelically-grounded give-and-take of the ecclesial community can lead to a ministry of the gospel that too easily degenerates into a managerial millennialism. Increasingly there is society-wide awareness of a management crisis. This situation is an open invitation to the ecumenical churches to develop a theology of ministry and church structure that can re-Word Aaron’s highpriestly, though idolatrous, “voice from within” that desires to work managerial “marvels for eyes and ears to witness.”

¹⁵Michael Root, “Called to the Office of Ministry,” *Currents in Theology and Mission* 12 (June 1985) 159-64.

¹⁶*The Book of Concord*, ed. Theodore G. Tappert (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1959) 327.

¹⁷Francine Cardman, “BEM and the Community of Women and Men,” *Journal of Ecumenical Studies* 21 (Winter 1984) 89.