

The Responsibilities of Theology to Business (or the Responsibilities of the Butcher, the Baker, and the Imagemaker)

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Introduction

The title of this talk presupposes some important definitions. The conference title, “The Responsibilities of Theology”, struck me firstly as rather odd, but also as strikingly familiar. Many is the time I have seen the heading “The Responsibilities of Business”. In this light, such terminology implies that there is some kind of corporate (in its original sense) identity under the heading “theology” or “business”, to which some kind of responsibility can be ascribed. Lots of ink has been spilt over whether one can say in any meaningful way that the business corporation “acts” and can therefore “have responsibilities”, and this title seems to invite the same kind of approach to the “enterprise of theology”.¹

I’ve taken a particular line on these questions, which is apparent in the thesis below. To take a particular line in order to get somewhere is the kind of thing that a business person would do. Results are important to businesspeople—an important point for theology to take on board—but the drawback in this is that to focus on results also tends to narrow down the discussion. In order to “get somewhere” I am going to do the same thing, which will inevitably leave some avenues of possible discussion left untouched.

The Thesis: What kind of responsibility?

The primary responsibility of theology is to offer her fullest specific content (what God has done for us, and how we can respond) in the fullest possible engagement (dialogue) with the business disciplines, based on a well-thought out and serious understanding of both the theological tradition and of innovation in theology, and of the disciplines of business, communicated in a way that is cogent, clear and convincing. This is possible for theology because she has in mind the fullest development of the human person to whom the activity of business belongs. In order to make a persuasive case, examples of business practice are an essential element (equivalent to the lives of the saints within the realm of religious practice). Therefore, the creation and dissemination of real world examples in which a dialogue between theology and business leads to some concrete positive outcome (by various criteria) forms part of the

responsibility of theology to business and economic power.

First of all, I talk about a “primary” responsibility. That leaves room for other responsibilities, such as those of *theologians* rather than *theology*, but which depend on this primary one. As can also be seen, I am thinking of theology as a “body of thought”, developing in continuity with the past. Secondly, there is the idea of “offering her fullest possible content” in the “fullest possible engagement”, which is the part of the thesis on which this paper is focussed. I suggest some elements of the content of the Christian tradition that are central to the engagement, but, most of all, I want to talk about the different *forms* of engagement, both because of their importance and because this point has been a bone of contention between business specialists and at least some theologians. Why use the term “engagement” and not “dialogue”? I would say that dialogue is a subset of the forms of engagement, as we see later. Engagement carries the idea of trying to reconnect the two realms of theology and business, and a dialogue may be possible on the basis of this. Thirdly, there is the mention of a “well-thought out” and “serious understanding” of theology and the business disciplines as the basis of the dialogue. It is true that a more complete thesis would have to say much more about the basis of the engagement—for instance, that it is premised, from the point of view of theology, on a “graced presence in the world”. This is one of the points I am going to skip over for the sake of getting on. Theology, having an all-embracing interest in the person and the human community, looks at the engagement more “globally” (including its consequences for other areas of human endeavour) than does business. The importance of examples is self-evident, I think, especially for the “average” business person who does not grasp all the theological theory. Although I’ll use some examples in this talk, this important part of the thesis isn’t my main focus. The reason why I mention particularly a good grounding in the two disciplines that we are talking about here is that it seems to me that often the dialogue falters on this ground.²

How do we make the engagement?

The idea of models of engagement was sparked by the rather long debate at the end of the ‘80’s and in the early 90’s in *Communio* between its editor, David Schindler, and Michael Novak, George Weigel and Richard Neuhaus, as well as, fairly obviously, by Dulles and his “Models of the Church”.³ In the course of one these rather acrimonious articles, where Schindler is answering Novak, he tries to get at *what theology* we are trying to engage with modern liberal institutions like businesses, and says the following:

This is why I called attention...to the three main theological traditions in Catholicism this century. However else these traditions—schematically: “neoscholasticism”, “transcendental Thomism” and “*ressourcement* theology”—differ, they differ regarding the autonomy of nature in relation to grace and of the world in relation to the Church. (Schindler, 1992, p. 168)

In other words, he wants to indicate that, this century, there have been three particularly important ways theologically of approaching an engagement with “worldly” realities. I would suggest slightly differently that, from the point of view of theology, we can identify two basic ways of making the engagement with business, which I’ve chosen to call the *Critical* and the *Dialogue*, though perhaps the titles could be improved. These models will be presented (in a slightly different format) in a book coming out next year, co-authored with Michael Naughton, *Managing As If Faith Matters*. The dialogue model can then subsequently be split into two subcategories: *normative* and *pluralist* dialogue. This is where our friends the butcher, the baker and imagemaker come in. Roughly speaking, the first would correspond with the *ressourcement* position, the second with a neoThomist position and the third with the transcendental Thomist line. Like Schindler, let me recognise here that this is a idealisation, and real theologians do use different models. Not surprisingly, therefore, proponents of the different models all claim John Paul II as supporting their position, though, somewhat surprisingly, they often seem to think his thought doesn’t lend credence to any other position.

The Critical Model

One of the comments that Schindler makes in his debate with Novak et al is that there has been little or no influence of *ressourcement* theology on the engagement between theology and business. What Schindler does not say, and which seems to me important, is that given von Balthasar’s writing on the modern world and on science, it is not surprising that theologians influenced by him have not developed a theology of engagement with business. It would seem to be almost against the grain for *ressourcement* theologians to do so. Their approach is more a kind of prophetic calling back of the world from the direction into which it has strayed, and although a dialogue could then take place, since the world hasn’t yet “come back”, the dialogue hasn’t yet begun. In other words, dialogue takes place after conversion (the first stage of engagement). Dialogue on any other basis is fruitless; it will involve people talking across each other at cross purposes with irreconcilable and fundamental differences. Any body of secular thought needs to be nested within the Catholic tradition, reinterpreted within that tradition and thus transformed

in the light of faith. This is why I haven't called this model a form of "dialogue", because it just has not developed like this. Hence, the application of the "butcher" image to this model: the system has to be broken down and reconstructed before we can do anything with it.

As a result, if theology considers questions of a secular nature, such as "what constitutes a good business organisation?", without explicitly drawing on the data of revelation, it not only misrepresents the faith, it also misrepresents the secular reality under discussion. I would suggest that it is important that such a model of engagement is promoted within the theological disciplines, but it seems to me limited in its range of application to a fundamental critique of the economic order and perhaps the situation where no dialogue is possible because of the imperviousness of the business system to the implications of the Gospel.⁴

Seen from the perspective of the manager, this model cannot operate in this way. In our book, we do talk about a *prophetic* model, but that involves a situation where a business person has to make a stand against an intolerable situation rather than at the connection between a particular type of theology and business practice (called "whistleblowing" in the business field). This is, therefore, one of the areas where the responsibility of theology diverges from that of those in business.

Normative Dialogue

In this model, one brings to the discussion a clear and upfront commitment to the Gospel and the tradition of the Church founded upon it. In the dialogue, one learns of the insights developed within other traditions of thought, scientific findings, personal experiences, institutions and social structures of and from others. One then sifts through what one has received carefully in the light of the Gospel and tradition of the Church. The baker image works here in the sense that in this model, theology adds her leaven to the natural components of the dough so as to make it "come alive" so to speak—so that they can reach their potential. One searches for what can be welcomed into and/or incorporated within the Church's tradition and for what needs to be challenged as it appears to lead to injustice or some other kind of damage of the human person or community. Further interaction may bring to light new evidence that indicates that the initial judgement needs to be revised, either in a positive or negative sense, and thus the dialogue progresses. The point of coming to a judgement is to offer to others a critical view to those in the management or economic sphere. If possible, it has the practical aim of bringing about change if those in the situation are willing to listen to this critique.

In our book, we look at the possibility of this model working within the firm, and, a surprising number of times, it does operate in one way or

another, in the sense that there is an upfront engagement between the faith of the business people within it and their business activity. Many companies, for instance, have been founded explicitly on a basis of faith-inspired values. One of the most difficult challenges faced by these organisations is to express that faith at work in a way that is both forthright and specific without being rigid or exclusive. An example taken from our book is that of Reell Precision Manufacturing, a company founded by three evangelical Christians who are quite interested in Catholic social teaching. In a discussion over the mission statement of the firm, some employees expressed discomfort at the explicitly religious language in the firm's mission statement. These few employees endorsed and accepted the moral convictions of Reell, but they did not share the theological vision that inspired and grounded those moral principles.

In the ensuing discussion over the religious character of the firm's mission, Bob Wahlstedt, then President of Reell, raised the question: *How do you guarantee a commitment to the moral convictions of the company and the just treatment of stakeholders without articulating the spiritual vision that inspired these convictions in the first place?* He believed that if all references to the core beliefs that had inspired Reell's purpose were withdrawn, it would be difficult to resist reduction of the company to a mere collection of various stakeholders' individual interests. For Wahlstedt, to lose that mission's religious grounding would be to lose Reell's essential character and to risk undermining its moral commitments. In the end, a different form of words was agreed which did not exclude all references to religious belief (see below). Companies like Reell Precision Manufacturing demonstrate the possibility for an organization based on expressly Christian principles to operate in a pluralistic world of work.

The implications for the engagement between theology and the business disciplines are important here. The Christian vision championed by Reell and similar firms mandates just treatment for all stakeholders and, accordingly, respect for the religious liberty of employees. It welcomes dialogue with the world, affirming that insight and truth come from many different sources. However, it also affirms that one can undertake an authentic exchange of views only if one has a clear view of one's own. It is a vision that attempts the integration of faith and work in both *deed* and *word*, in practice and in theory.

In other situations than the one of a company like Reell, normative dialogue can often be difficult for the manager to enter into, but, for theology, it is perhaps the option used most often. It can, however, fall between two stools, lacking both the critical edge of the critical model, although it does provide a critique, and an uncritical acceptance of the

norms of others as in the pluralist dialogue approach, although it does involve listening to others and maintaining dialogue with them. On the other hand, it is the most integrated of the models, recognising that thinkers in the Church need to learn from those of other perspectives while working within and developing their own.

Excerpt from:

Our RPM Direction

RPM is a team dedicated to the purpose of operating a business based on the practical application of Judeo-Christian values for the mutual benefit of: co-workers and their families, customers, shareholders, suppliers, and community.

We are committed to provide an environment where there is no conflict between work and moral/ethical values or family responsibilities and where everyone is treated justly.

The tradition of excellence at RPM has grown out of a commitment to excellence rooted in the character of our Creator. Instead of driving each other toward excellence, we strive to free each other to grow and express the desire for excellence that is within all of us. By adhering to the following principles, we are challenged to work and make decisions consistent with God's purpose for creation according to our individual understanding. . .

Pluralist Dialogue

Here, the main concern is practical: what can we do to make Catholic thought more influential in society and more available to others? This is the model of Novak and his colleagues. In this model, one starts by looking for common ground between secular thought and Catholic social teaching, usually referring to some concept of "natural law". We are all human beings, sharing human nature, therefore we all have some notion of what is good and bad in society, what should be punished or praised, and so on. Those using this model accept that we are living in a pluralist society and try to contribute to that society whatever is possible given the constraints that pluralism sets on each tradition or culture that is represented in the society. They try to draw the Catholic tradition into the public sphere by showing how it gives a more adequate basis to our conception of management or economic systems; it is thus these systems that set the terms for the engagement between the faith and secular thought. The "imagemaker" tag got attached to this model, quite apart from the rhyme, because it aims to create a final result, the final image, without attention to the basis on which this was attained. Maritain in his work with the UN on the Declaration of Human Rights exemplifies this when he said of this landmark charter: "We agree on these rights, *providing we are not asked why*. With the 'why' the dispute begins."⁵

An example of an implicitly Christian-influenced mission statement, which we use in our book, would be the “Beliefs” of Borg-Warner, a manufacturing company in the US. While the Christian faith of the Chief Executive who set out to produce this “credimus” influenced its tone and content, “The Beliefs” avoid explicitly religious language.

The strength of this model is that it brings a wide range of people into contact with aspects of the Catholic tradition, some who perhaps would not be prepared to listen to it under any other form, but it is not able to present an integrated Catholic vision, making clear the richness of interplay between the Catholic faith and human learning. Its danger therefore is that in its attempt to meet others on common ground, it may end up diluting what is essential to a Catholic approach so that we could not recognise it as based on the Gospel within the Catholic tradition. This is a danger for anyone involved in this kind of dialogue. Those using this model need the critical thinkers to speak out and prevent the Catholic approach from losing its identity. An interesting example of how a theologian has become involved in using this kind of model is that of Donald Nicholl in his work as an adviser to Rio Tinto Zinc (RTZ).⁶ I doubt, however, if this model could ever become the main model of engagement for many theologians (and shouldn’t ever become so for *theology*). This is, of course, the normal model of engagement for someone in a business, but it is probably the least often used by theologians.

Summary of

The Beliefs of Borg-Warner: To Reach Beyond the Minimal⁷

Any business is a member of a social system, entitled to the rights and bound by the responsibilities of that membership. Its freedom to pursue economic goals is constrained by law and channelled by the forces of a free market. But these demands are minimal, requiring only that a business provide wanted goods and services, compete fairly, and cause no obvious harm. For some companies, that is enough. It is not enough for Borg-Warner. We impose upon ourselves an obligation to reach beyond the minimal. We do so convinced that by making a larger contribution to the society that sustains us, we best assure not only its future vitality, but our own.

This is what we believe.

We believe in the dignity of the individual. . .

We believe in our responsibility to the common good. . .

We believe in the endless quest for excellence. . .

We believe in continuous renewal. . .

We believe in the commonwealth of Borg-Warner and its people...

Borg-Warner is both a federation of businesses and a community of people. Our goal is to preserve the freedom each of us needs to find personal satisfaction while building the strength that comes from unity. True unity is more than a melding of self-interests; it results when values and ideals also are shared. Some of ours are spelled out in these statements of belief. Others include faith in our political, economic, and spiritual heritage; pride in our work and our company; the knowledge that loyalty must flow in many directions, and a conviction that power is strongest when shared. We look to the unifying force of these beliefs as a source of energy to brighten the future of our company and all who depend on it.

Conclusion

So, the main point of the thesis, which is rather pedestrian, is that these models are all important and all need to be actively pursued. The engagement between theology and business would be impoverished if any of these three models were absent. They all exist within the tradition and history of the Church, with authoritative backing, and I would suggest that each approach could not be developed fully without the development of the others. This is because each approach has its limitations; the others highlight these and they all keep each other in check. For instance, the presence of the critical writers actually allows the pluralist dialogue-makers to become more involved in society, since the heart of the latter's approach is being clearly expressed by the "critics". And the normative dialogue writers bridge between the work of the other two. As a whole, these three groups can push forward the engagement between theology and business in our pluralist and secular societies. Adopting one approach as *the* one, like adopting one model of the Church as the "correct" one, would impoverish and misrepresent what Catholic thought has to offer to our society. Part of the debate between Novak and Schindler is the rhetorical one about how to bring about change—how to transform economic and political culture so that it is more grounded in the Christian faith and more open to that faith. Is fundamental conversion needed, or is dialogue the main mechanism?⁸

A secondary point is that the models have different importance from the perspective of the business person and of the theologian. Though they can both use all three models, for the bulk of the time the business person will have to use the pluralist model, while the theologian may well be providing a critique (either as a "butcher" or as a "baker"!) and would probably use the pluralist model least of all (in general). I think it is important to differentiate between the role of the theologian and the business person in this respect, because they each have their own part to play in the transformation of culture in a truly Christian direction. The

models or methods of engaging business and theology work from both directions, but in somewhat different ways.

Theology has had, and will continue to have the chance to influence the world of business and economics, and needs to use all the means at her disposal to do so.

- 1 The question of the moral status of the firm is more important than it might look at first. Although we are more familiar with discussions of the morality of the market, in practice, most economic activity does not take place in the market but within institutions like businesses, hospitals or the family.
- 2 See my article "Bridging the Gap" in *Priests and People*, May 1998.
- 3 Relevant articles in *Communio* include Novak (1992), and Schindler (1992); Lowery (1991), Weigel (1991), and Schindler (1991). Lowery references the articles relevant to the debate prior to 1991.
- 4 It was pointed out to me during the CTA conference that Schindler has been working with the Focolare movement on the elaboration of their idea of the "economy of communion". Still, the Focolare approach is hardly considered mainstream amongst economists, let alone business people.
- 5 Maritain (1951), 77.
- 6 See his article in *The Tablet*, 29 May 1999.
- 7 Matthews et al. (1991), 184.
- 8 Lowery says on this point: "It would seem that both parties desire to be truly transformational. But Schindler wants that transformation integrally Catholic, while Weigel et al. see the need-in a pluralistic society-to use the *natural law* portion of Catholicism (severed from the data of revelation) as a transformative presence. For it is either that or nothing-given a pluralistic society. . . (I)t would appear that the real issue lurking behind the debate is that of religious freedom. To have a truly integral Catholic transformative presence, it would seem necessary to shift away from the commonly accepted claim that *Dignitatis Humanae* represents a positive case of doctrinal development." (Lowery, 1991, 435).

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