

Organization as Religion

by: C.A. Brewer

Abstract

Discussion of organizational structure falls under many forms. Popular thought assigns metaphors to describe the different organizational realities inherent in many businesses and in use by various managers; organizations as machines, organisms, brains, cultures, political systems, psychic prisons, and as instruments of domination. Another metaphor has been overlooked, one that addresses the underlying reason for the hierarchical structure that supports and encourages organizational metaphors, and explains the fascination with organizational theory prevalent in American society. An examination of organizations as religion and the structure of religious organization uncovers many parallels with other organizational metaphors, and brings to light the reasoning behind the metaphors.

Introduction

It may be that our role on this planet is not to worship God, but to create him.

-- Arthur C. Clarke

It is not accidental that the organizational structure of most businesses falls under the classical bureaucratic model. Organizations from military, to government, to schools, to Fortune 500 companies all follow a traditional pyramidal structure where ultimate control and authority rest at the apex, with the general, mayor, or chief executive of the organization. This structure is familiar, comfortable, and deeply engrained in the unconscious of traditionally monotheistic societies. It is a cause of resistance to fundamental change in organizations, because people, for one reason or another, wish to cling to a hierarchical model (Morgan, 1989). Why are hierarchies so prevalent? Mainly because they facilitate both monitoring and control, and firmly establish the relationship between superior and subordinate (Casson, 1994). This is not unlike the organizational structure of the traditional Judeo-Christian religions, which emphasize man's place in the world in terms of his relationship with God and the church, synagogue, or mosque to which he belongs. Religious organizations, in one form or another, have been present much longer than organizational analyses. Issues that scholars now define as organizational have been present in religious settings since their beginnings. A bureaucratic organizational structure was described in the book of Exodus. (Bartunek, 1999).

Organizations as Religion

Religion has been around as long as human beings have been around, indeed, the origins of religion and the worship of gods is so far back in human consciousness that a start point cannot be precisely identified. It is known that human beings have been worshipping gods prior to recorded history. Religion has been an attempt to find meaning and value in life, and it also seems to have been something that we have always done (Armstrong, 1993). Mythology and ritual helped to evoke a sense of significance to members of monotheistic faiths. When science and rationalism took over at the end of the nineteenth century as the means to provide an explanation of the world and its mysteries, Christian theology also began to emphasize rational discourse and attempted to replace mysticism, intuition, and liturgy with reason (Armstrong, 2000).

Christian religions, particularly the Roman Catholic Church, follow a certain structure in the manner in which they set up their organization. The pyramidal structure inherent in the organization was well suited to rational discourse. The pyramid has three main properties:

- Unity of Command
- Span of Responsibility
- Stacking

In unity of command, there is one person at the top, God, or in the case of the Roman Catholic Church, his representative, the Pope. This is the single person ultimately responsible for the performance of the organization. The span of responsibility encompasses the monitors, those who observe the people under them and report to the

unity of command. In the Roman Catholic Church, there are several layers of monitors. Directly under the Pope are the Cardinals; under the Cardinals are the Archbishops, then the Bishops, and finally the Priests. Even in the span of responsibility there is a hierarchy of subordinates and superiors and a definite structure to their relationship. At the bottom of the pyramid is the stacking. These are the individuals that are controlled by the hierarchy in the pyramid above them (Casson, 1994). They represent the lay people and worshipers in the Catholic religion. In order to reach the apex of the pyramid, the members of the bottom layer must travel up the hierarchical chain in a structured fashion. Conversely, the flow of information down the pyramid is not subject to the same delays and interpretations, since the information to be disseminated is not subject to question as is the information originating at the bottom of the pyramid. This is reminiscent of the structure of many organizations in Western society and the cause of conflict when eastern organizations, such as Japanese manufacturing with their more organic structure, attempt to work within Western hierarchical standards.

The Industrial Revolution and the rise of manufacturing in the late eighteenth century called for a new method of management in order to keep control over the vast quantities of people and materials now available. The style that evolved from this complexity was 'scientific management', the proponent of which, Frederic Winslow Taylor attempted to create a form of cheap, passive, interchangeable people that mirrored the cheap, passive, interchangeable machine parts readily available in this new era. (Wertheim, 1998). Factory efficiency had been enhanced by standardization of product design, component parts, and tools, and by the widespread use of standard, engine driven

machine tools. What remained non-standardized was the labor component. (Schonberger, 1982).

Scientific management came at the end of an era where the church found itself in competition with science for the hearts and minds of the people. Science was rational, objective, and could prove its hypotheses by reason. Religion relied on faith to prove its point, and when religion attempted to apply scientific principles to theology, it seemed to contradict the literal meaning of the Bible (Armstrong, 2000). Human beings began to focus on the here and now rather than the afterlife, while at the same time responding to the basic ideas of the Protestant Reformation that work is a profound moral obligation, and a path to eternal salvation. The focus is on this world and materialism. The individual's obligation is self-discipline and systematic work. (Wertheim, 1998). Discouraged from placing their fate in the hands of religion without scientific proof, people looked for another place to put their faith, while still retaining their underlying need to be a part of a something bigger than themselves. They were trapped in the ritual and myth that was religion.

Since its beginnings, religion has been a psychic prison. Religion had created a reality and structure to the world that people were reluctant to live without. With the perceived failure of religion to keep up with the times, people sought to replace it with another structure that offered the same organization, and rules. People were trapped in the artificially constructed reality of the religious hierarchy, and rather than using the disruption of the Industrial Revolution to transform their thinking, they chose to replace the religious organizational structure with the scientific management structure of an organization. They paired themselves with industry and organizations in hopes that they

would be delivered from the uncertainty of religion's place in the modern world.

(Morgan, 1997). In doing so, people merely exchanged their place at the bottom of one pyramid for a place at the bottom of another, different pyramid.

This is the beginning of the idea of organizations as machines- routine, efficient, reliable, and as cultures, sharing a common societal value. Organizations operated in the same manner as religions, but disguised themselves with the trappings of scientific reasoning. There is structure and order to the organization, and everyone knows their place in the hierarchy and what is expected of them. German sociologist Max Weber identified some of the basic elements of this bureaucratic structure, which have parallels in religious hierarchy. Bureaucratic organizations tend to have:

- Formal rules and behavior bounded by rules (religions also have formal rules and their behavior is bound by those rules)
- Uniformity of operations continuity despite changes in personnel (The church runs the same, no matter if the Pope dies or if there is a sudden influx of adherents. Everyone has a recognized place in the order)
- Functional division of labor based on functional specialization (The Pope is the ultimate authority on all matters concerning the Catholic Church. Cardinals, Archbishops, Bishops and Priests all have their areas of responsibility and do not exceed their authority in those areas. A layperson's job is to worship, and the Priest's job is to direct their worship and answer

questions pertaining to their worship. Questions outside the Priest's scope of authority are passed up to another specialist, the Bishop)

- Rational allocation of tasks (Priests are responsible for their parishioners, Bishops are responsible for making sure Priests understand their responsibility, and interceding between the Priests and the Archbishops. Priests are not ready for the responsibilities of a Bishop or above, so they are not given information they don't need)
- Membership constitutes a career (Membership constitutes a career, Priests aspire to become Bishops, Cardinals, and even Pope one day)
- Proscribed authority-legally defined (There are definite guidelines for recourse, a rigid structure parallels the pyramid and is defined by the Pope, the Bible, or the Church)
- Specific sphere of competence (Priests aren't expected to know as much as Bishops, Bishops do not have the knowledge and decision making power of Archbishops and so on up the chain. They are authorities in their own areas of the world and church structure. The Pope is assumed most competent because of his position. All decisions made by the Pope are to be received as if they came from God)
- Legally based tenure (God given tenure)

This bureaucratic structure also serves as the model for organizations as political systems. Managers and church leaders both talk about authority, power, and superior-subordinate relationships. These are the activities of the ruler and the ruled. (Morgan, 1997). The Roman Catholic Church is an authoritarian structure, and this coincides with the hierarchical way it is run. The Pope is an authoritarian manager who wields considerable power as a result of his position in the organization. This power is stable, and clearly defined. There are no challenges to this autocratic system, because not everyone has an equal right to rule the Church. The nature of the pyramidal structure keeps control concentrated under a few individuals, and conflict within the structure minimal, and mostly covert. As a political system, the religious organization is well insulated against change. Failure to adapt to the current political system in the organization results in excommunication (firing). The position and importance of the individual in this type of organizational structure is directly related to his position in the pyramid.

This also leads to the idea of organizations as instruments of domination. Throughout history, organizations have been associated with processes of social domination where individuals or groups find ways of imposing their will on others. (Morgan, 1997) This is especially true of religious organizations. Christianity has its Inquisitions, and Islam has its jihad's. The organizational form of the Christian Church may have changed over time, from charismatic disorganized groups to patriarchal household units to locally centralized patriarchal authority in the figure of a bishop, to a gradual wider centralization in a Roman bureaucracy, to "protests" against this authority

and its tenets, to a present situation of considerable diversity in theology and polity (Bartunek, 1999), but its basic idea remained the same, a plan of salvation or redemption through the experience of one God.

Many management theorists view culture as a phenomenon with clearly defined attributes. Like organizational structure, culture is often reduced to a set of discrete variables such as values, beliefs, stories, norms, and rituals that can be documented and manipulated in some instrumental way (Morgan, 1997). This parallels the development of religious heritage in monotheistic cultures. Centuries were spent developing a set of beliefs and values that the people could understand, and rituals to help them apply these doctrines. The liturgy became ingrained in society. Beginning in the nineteenth century, advances in technology and science overshadowed religion. Karl Marx, Charles Darwin, Friedrich Nietzsche, and Sigmund Freud forged philosophies and scientific interpretations of reality that had no place for God, science and technology had made the old mythology invalid (Armstrong, 1993). Human beings began to look for traditions to take the place of what they were losing. Even Freud admitted that religion was a human need that affects life at every level (Armstrong, 1993).

In order to replace what they had lost, people sought to overlay the mores of religion on a new structure, industry. The culture of factories and offices did not spring forth full-blown; they were carefully structured around a pattern people found familiar. The organizational society substituted corporate culture for religious culture. There is symbolic significance to almost every aspect of organizational life. Even the most concrete and rational aspects of organization embody social constructions and meanings that are crucial for understanding how organizations function day by day (Morgan, 1997).

This is why there are problems integrating Japanese and American organizations. The underlying structure to the Japanese corporation is based on a mixture of the Buddhist and Shinto religions, which are more naturalistic and less ontological than Western religions. Because everything in nature is interrelated, and the organic structure of daily life omnipresent, the idea of total quality control is a logical consequence that Western hierarchical society didn't develop. Culture is not something that can be measured on a scale because it is a form of lived experience (Morgan, 1997).

Conclusion

Organization ultimately rests in shared systems of meaning, in the actions and interpretative schemes that create and recreate that meaning, by influencing the ideologies, values, beliefs, language, norms, ceremonies, and other social practices that ultimately shape and guide organized action (Morgan, 1997). As a metaphor, the organization as religion is at the top of the hierarchy of metaphors. It explains the need for symbolic significance that people invest in every aspect of organizational life. It allows an underlying structure to these mini societies that present day human beings spend a great deal of their time in. Religion has often helped people adjust to modernity, but it is impossible for fully modernized people to be religious in the old way. If people in this new age want to be religious, they would have to develop rites, beliefs, and practices that spoke to them in their radically altered circumstances (Armstrong, 2000). By examining the underlying structure of organizations, it becomes clear that tenets of monotheistic Western religions and their hierarchical authority serve as the basis for the

practical application of organizational theory. Closer study of organizations as machines, organisms, brains, cultures, political systems, psychic prisons, and instruments of domination, can also demonstrate how metaphorical thinking pervades all aspects of organizational life. Human beings cannot endure emptiness and desolation; they will fill the vacuum by creating a new focus of meaning (Armstrong, 1993). In modern times, this focus means applying ritualized religious tradition to the management and organizations of a secularized society.

References

- Armstrong, K. (1993) A history of God. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, Inc.
- Armstrong, K. (2000) The battle for God. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, Inc.
- Bartunek, J.M. [Review of the book Sacred companies: Organizational aspects of religion and religious aspects of organizations]. Administrative Science Quarterly 44 629.
- Casson, M. (1994). Why are firms hierarchical? Journal of the Economics of Business Vol. I Issue I, 47-77.
- Morgan, G. (1989) Creative organizational theory: a resourcebook. California: SAGE Publications, Inc.
- Morgan, G. (1997) Images of organization. California: SAGE Publications, Inc.
- Schonberger, R.J. (1982) Japanese manufacturing techniques: Nine hidden lessons in simplicity. New York: The Free Press.
- Wertheim, E.G. (1998). Historical background of organizational behavior. Retrieved on March 2, 2001 from World Wide Web:
<http://www.cba.neu.edu/~ewertheim/introd/history.htm>