Evangelical Review of Theology

A Global Forum

Published by

P: Paternoster:
thinking faith

✛ WEA
WORLD EVANGELICAL ALLIANCE
Theological Commission

A Theology of Institutions: A Survey of Global Evangelical Voices

Gregg A. Okesson

I FIRST RECALL encountering institutions when I was living in a small village in Tanzania. I had of course experienced them before, countless times during my life. But I had never really stopped to consider them. Institutions were a part of the world: a given that I merely accepted. They were a part of the public realm: the 'world' with all its ambiguous connotations. Nothing in my theological education prepared me for engaging institutions in that village. At the time, I possessed advanced degrees in biblical studies and intercultural studies, prepared (or so I thought) to face 'culture' with orthodoxy and acuity. But here I was thinking about institutions for what seemed the first time.

The institutions we faced during those years were small, parochial, yet intricately connected to larger structures in the region with deep, tangled, fibrous roots stretching in every direction. All my efforts to share the gospel and/or witness to people through holistic development projects encountered heavily reified social norms of 'health', 'economics', and 'politics', fed by an ever flowing stream of religious sources. I experienced institutions in the form of local leaders, supported by clans. I met them also in visible structures such as clinics, schools, and political parties. But most significantly I felt them. The institutions we bumped up against represented a kind of invisible power in the community.

Christians have long struggled with what to do with institutions in society, evangelicals no less so. For some, any such involvement smacks of Christendom or neo-colonialism. For others western Christianity's historic separation of public and private has not only left an empirical divide between the Church and State (and/or with other structures in society), but perhaps more significantly, nurtured a kind of 'social imaginary' that lends institutions the perception of power, and dirty power at that.[1] What is more, Chris-

---

1 Taylor defines 'social imaginary' as 'the ways in which they [people] imagine their social existence, how they fit together with others, how things go on between them and their fellows, the expectations which are normally

Gregg Okesson, *PhD (University of Leeds), is Dean of the E. Stanley Jones School of World Mission and Evangelism, Asbury Theological Seminary, USA. He teaches in the areas of Public Missiology, Development, Mission, and Leadership. He spent 13 years in East Africa as a theological educator and church planter before coming to Asbury. He is the author of* Re-Imaging Modernity: A Contextualized Theological Study of Power and Humanity witin Akamba Christianity in Kenya *(Pickwick, 2012).*

tian attempts to take back power and/or create rival structures have often been misguided, adding layers to the implicit impression that institutions such as politics (or economics) stand impervious to the gospel. The subject becomes more complicated if we look at how sin reifies in institutional forms, to create what biblical writers refer to as 'powers.'

In this paper, I will examine the theology of institutions through the lenses of John Wesley, Dietrich Bonhoeffer, John Howard Yoder, and conclude with the work of a few global scholars such as Emmanuel Katongole, Vinoth Ramachandra and Andrew Walls. I argue that evangelicals do indeed have theological resources for engaging institutions, but need to keep nurturing these further if we are going to participate in the reconciliation of all things under the Lordship of Jesus Christ (Eph 1:10).

1 Understanding Institutions: Different Maps of the Cosmos

One of the first things that alerted me to the need to engage institutions in Tanzania was encountering a different map of the cosmos. In the West, we often operate with the *perception* of distance between a person and an institution, although the actual distance tends to be more imagined than real. But in the village, the institutions we faced seemed to morph into human identity. This was the case for things

like ethnicity, religion, but no less politics, economics and agriculture. Whenever I met people, I also came face-to-face with the institution behind them.

This is to argue that institutions operate according to certain cultural givens. For western societies this tends to follow strict lines, distinguishing a person from the larger social entity along with equally clear markers between religion and public life. My experience in Tanzania, however, presented a different case altogether. Not only was the perceived distance between the person and institution completely different, but in most cases religion provided the rationale and warrant for the institution's very existence.[2]

The mention of religion introduces a key distinction in how societies map institutions. In the West, the Enlightenment project reshuffled the deck with regard to how societies look at cosmological issues. The public realm became associated with the scientific method while religion became relegated to the private domain and thought of in terms of 'personal belief'. This bifurcation enlarged the former, while it diminished the latter.

One of the results of this heritage was the prevalence of a 'secular imaginary' within western societies where institutions (for the sake of this discussion) became largely viewed as empirical realities, 'Or put another way, people understand what markets

---

met, and the deeper normative notions and images which underlie these expectations' (Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age* [Cambridge, MA: The Belknap Press, 2007], 171).

2 For more on this see W. Arens and Ivan Karp (ed.), *Creativity of Power: Cosmology and Action in African Societies* (Washington DC: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1995); or Stephen Ellis and Gerrie ter Haar, *Worlds of Power: Religious Thought and Political Practice in Africa* (London: Hurst, 2004).

are by means of a social imaginary in which the relevant explanations of their operations are all this-worldly.'[3] Craig Calhoun explains that this 'secular imaginary' was not only the default position of secularists, but even people who operate according to religious beliefs accepted this to be the case.[4] Charles Taylor's monumental work, *A Secular Age*, shows how people in western societies think of themselves and the world according to 'the immanent frame' or this-worldly ways, without respect to religious beliefs.[5]

Calhoun argues that the secular, or *saeculum*, from its Greek and Latin use, was not meant to contrast with sacred, but with eternity: 'It was temporary, a time of waiting, not simply years stretching infinitely into the future.'[6] However, despite the legitimacy of the secular realm for all societies, and notwithstanding the vitality of religion all around the world, the western heritage continues to feed an imaginary theory that life revolves around the secular. Institutions get interpreted through such lenses.

Other cultures around the world do not suffer the same problem. In Africa, as in places in Asia and Latin America, one might argue quite the opposite, where a 'sacred imaginary' operates. People look at the secular realm through the lenses of religion, or as Ellis and Haar remark: 'it is largely through religious ideas that Africans think about the world today, and that religious ideas provide them with a means of becoming social and political actors'.[7] Andrew Walls explains that Africans operate on a fundamentally different map of the universe, with traffic constantly moving back and forth across spiritual and material divides.[8]

This does not mean that religion controls institutions. Perhaps Harri Englund says it best:

> The relationship between Christianity and public culture in Africa is not so much an instance of religion determining some people's approach to apparently secular institutions as an invitation to rethink the manner in which influential academic and popular theories, with the secularization thesis *and its inversions* at the helm, have partitioned society into subsystems.[9]

Hence, the phrases, 'secular imaginary' and 'sacred imaginary' at once foreground the importance of secular and sacred for different societies without running the risk of binary speech and making the mistake of suggesting that such cultures are somehow intrinsically secular or sacred. The word 'imaginary' focuses upon perception, or deep underlying mythic beliefs. People from these societies do indeed map the cosmos differently with regard to institutions, but more significantly they believe that religion either does or does

---

3 Craig Calhoun, 'Rethinking Secularism', *The Hedgehog Review* 12:3 (Fall 2010), 35–48: 37.

4 Calhoun, 'Rethinking', 38.

5 Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age* (Cambridge: Belknap Press, 2007).

6 Calhoun, 'Rethinking', 38.

7 Ellis and ter Haar, *Worlds of Power*, 2.

8 Andrew Walls, *The Cross-Cultural Process in Christian History* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2002), 122ff.

9 Harri Englund, 'Introduction', In Englund (ed.) *Christianity and Public Culture in Africa* (Athens, OH: Ohio University Press, 2011), 19.

not underlie societal structures, often through symbolic imagery.

In the remainder of this article I will explore how different theologians have looked at institutions. In some cases, the resources will be more generally presented such as was the case with John Wesley, who, at times, was actively engaged in theological activity with a given institution (such as economics or the slave trade) but rarely in such direct language as we find later. In other instances, scholars more overtly mention institutions, such as with Bonhoeffer and Yoder who lived during unique epochs (ie Nazi regime and Cold War) where the subject of institutions became more pronounced.

At the end I include some voices from global scholars to show some of the emerging contributions from the global south (which is where the material regarding a 'sacred imaginary' and 'secular imaginary' just presented will be more fully developed).

II Theological Reflections on Institutions

As intimated in my previous narrative, institutions represent a vital part of our world; however, theologians have often struggled to know what to do with them. There are many reasons for this, whether because of Christianity's long history of collusion with institutions in society (Christendom, colonialism, etc); the paucity of theological resources for thinking of institutions in the context of creation or humanity; general uneasiness in regard to what to do about structural sin (whether because of western evangelicalism's bias toward the individual, or out of fear of being accused of Marxism or Liberation Theology); or because of the insti-

tutional nature of the church with all its internal fallibilities.

Whatever the reasons, institutions have not featured prominently in our theological heritage. With this admitted, I would like to suggest that we are not as disadvantaged as this implies. In what follows I would like to outline some foundational thoughts regarding a theology of institutions from key evangelical theologians with the hope of better positioning us for engagement with this vital part of our world.[10]

III John Wesley's Trinitarian and 'Political' Image of God:

The difficulty of using Wesley for tackling the thorny issue of institutions becomes apparent within the contextual nature of his writings.[11] He was above all a child of his day. Both of his parents, with slight differences, supported the British monarchy. His theology was thus largely derived from the belief that all power comes from God and rests upon certain persons who then have the obligation to use it as a trust. As such, he was pro-monarchy, but with a healthy role for the constitution and Parliament (he advocated a more restricted, constitutional monarchy

---

10 For much of what follows, the context for talking about institutions will be the political realm. Rather than seeing this as a weakness, I would have us extrapolate what we learn from these scholars for dealing with broader institutions in society.

11 For this section, I will draw upon two books: Theodore R. Weber, *Politics in the Order of Salvation: Transforming Wesleyan Political Ethics* (Nashville, TN: Kingswood Books, 2001); and Gregory R. Coates, *Politics Strangely Warmed: Political Theology in the Wesleyan Spirit* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2015).

than the divine-right royalists; hence, he was a moderate Tory, and certainly not a Jacobite).[12]

As such, Wesley was adamant in opposing the belief that power comes from the people, seen in his criticism of the American colonies, as outlined in his treatise, 'Thoughts Concerning the Origin of Power'. Wesley further believed, perhaps pragmatically, that the preeminent goal of religious liberty and the spread of the gospel required sovereign political order. As his Methodist movement grew in size and scope, he received pressure to assuage any concerns about revolution against the government by assuring people of his allegiance to King and country. He did this with great energy. Thus Theodore Weber says of Wesley, '[His] political thinking and acting were of the eighteenth century, contextualized in contemporary British struggles over absolutism, constitutionalism, and liberalism, and the unity or division of the empire.'[13]

Contrary to other faith traditions, Weber argues that Methodists lack an adequate symbol for engaging in political discourse. Unlike Lutherans who talk about 'Two Kingdoms', or Anabaptists who might use the language of 'alternative communities',[14] those from a Wesleyan heritage often find themselves deficient in political language, which Weber defines as 'a form of communication that interprets political reality and sets expectations for political behavior'.[15]

Despite these reasons to dismiss Wesley as having anything substantive to contribute to a theology of institutions, we must also acknowledge that he represents a very important figure. Firstly, Wesley represents something of an enigma, providing a continual stream of seemingly paradoxical statements, where, for example, he cautions preachers not to speak about politics, but then freely addresses political realities; or where he supports the prevailing institutions of his day, but then harshly maligns social, economic, and political forces that supported slavery; or where he talks in unflinching terms about the gospel and evangelism, but then moves with equal resolve into the dire circumstances of those living in poverty, engaging social, economic, and political ills.[16]

What are we to make of these seemingly contradictory statements? Does Wesley speak out of both sides of his mouth or is there something deeper that allows him to move in such seemingly irreconcilable ways? What is more, after his death we find a wide range of Wesleyan streams contributing an incredible force for social change: through the abolition of slavery, fighting for the rights for women, countering the excesses of alcohol, leading to relief and development all around the world.[17] What is behind all of this?

---

12 Weber, *Politics*, 191ff.

13 Weber, *Politics*, 28.

14 Weber, *Politics*, 17.

15 Weber, *Politics*, 17.

16 See Christine Pohl, 'Practicing Hospitality in the face of "Complicated Wickedness"', *Wesley Theological Journal* 42:1 (2007), 7–31.

17 See Donald W. Dayton and Douglas M. Strong, *Rediscovering an Evangelical Heritage: A Tradition and Trajectory of Integrating Piety and Justice* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2014).

Perhaps some of it can be attributed to the contextual nature of Wesley's theology, where he resists inflexible categories and relies more on integration, synthesis, and imagination, drawing from such sources as the Eastern Church, Reformation, Pietism, while firmly rooted in Anglicanism.[18] But deeper down we find a basic trinitarian theology that flows from God to humanity through the image of God concept (in its moral, natural, and political dimensions).

It is with such a mind set that Weber offers what might be called a constructionist view of Wesley's theology that takes the pieces already there, but brings them together into a larger framework to provide a 'symbol' or 'political language' for engagement with societal institutions. While Weber articulates this in terms of Wesley's *ordo salutis*, or way of salvation (through prevenient, justifying, and sanctifying grace), it actually begins earlier, with God's nature.

For Wesley everything begins with God's character, where the love experienced in Father, Son, and Holy Spirit spills forth to create and redeem human nature. While Wesley's political views tended to be more top-down hierarchical than diffused egalitarian, his views of the Trinity lay the foundation for a more dynamic, participative, and grace-defining view of the world.[19] As such, rather than locating politics in creation, or theological anthropology, for Wesley it actually begins with God. Weber explains,

Government as disclosed in human nature as political image is what God does in ordering, preserving, and developing the creation…. It is the government at once of Creator, Sustainer, Redeemer; of Father, Son, and Holy Spirit as unified divine personality.[20]

While such a view might be specifically located in Christ, since the work of salvation on the cross remains foundational for redeeming the world, it would also make room for God the loving Father and the Holy Spirit to bring efficacious salvation to the world.

From God's nature, Wesley moves comfortably to human nature, since the fundamental task of humans is to imitate God, which they accomplish through the redemption of the *imago dei*. Although Wesley spends most of his time on the *moral* image, Weber argues that we should equally consider the *natural* image (which might include how humans organize themselves socially) and *political* image (related to the issue of 'dominion' over the rest of creation, but might also include how humans govern themselves).[21]

Wesley argues that the moral image is completely lost in humanity and requires God's gift of grace to redeem it; however, the other two aspects of the image of God are only partially lost, marred by sin so they cannot adequately bear witness to God without the redemption of the moral image.[22] Fur-

---

18 See Randy Maddox, *Responsible Grace: John Wesley's Practical Theology* (Nashville, TN: Kingswood Books, 1994).

19 Weber, *Politics*, 201, 231, 396f, 411.

20 Weber, *Politics*, 396.

21 See Wesley's notes on Genesis 1:26-28 where he intimates that the political image has more significance than just 'dominion' over animals. Weber, *Politics*, 403.

22 In relation to the political image, Weber says, under the effects of sin, 'dominance is no

thermore, by locating all of this within the *ordo salutis*, it actually allows Wesleyan theology the possibility of talking about political or economic witness within a soteriological framework.

What are the implications of this for institutions? Firstly, institutions begin within the Godhead, laying a foundation that involves the Trinity. While some begin with anthropology, Wesley begins with God, which then allows him to move into the image of God concept, having already laid the framework for institutions within the Trinity. By beginning with God, he was thus able to take seriously social, economic, and political dimensions of life. Weber says,

> Political institutions fashioned in the image of God must concern themselves in good conscience and with adequate resources—with education, the needs of the poor, public and private health, the arts, and other matters that enable the members of the community to fulfill their political vocation of imaging God.[23]

This should not come across as trying to orient all of life around politics, something James Davidson Hunter cautions already takes place in our overly politicized world.[24] Rather, it is an effort to interpret institutions from

God's nature. 'Political image keeps the focus of political institutions and their operators on God's political work, not themselves.'[25]

Second, Weber explains that such a view reorients institutions from a top-down hierarchical perspective to become a fundamental facet of human identity. All people image God and do it most faithfully together, which moves theological anthropology into its institutional forms.[26] Humanity can be comprehended only in its corporate sense (which is always how Wesley spoke about the political image) guarding it from the dangers of individual interests. Furthermore, the natural image and political image work together to help frame 'political institutions [as] a rational exercise of the *natural image* to fashion proper instruments for the fulfillment of the vocation of the *political image*'.[27]

Finally, the political image makes it possible to talk about institutions in the context of salvation. This should not intimate that political engagement is somehow the same as evangelism, or social engagement as redemption. Rather, by drawing institutions into a larger soteriological framework, it is possible to first think theologically before we think politically, and thus apply the redemption of the moral image to the larger, social construct.[28]

What is more, because of the *ordo salutis*, it is possible to speak of the redemption of humans in terms of prevenient grace (allowing us to see a meas-

---

longer the dominion of responsible stewardship, one characterized by hostility between the human creature and the other animals…. The *constitution* of the political image has not been lost, but the *representational aspect* of imaging has been redirected.' (*Politics*, 395)

23 Weber, *Politics*, 406.

24 James Davidson Hunter, *To Change the World: The Irony, Tragedy, and Possibility of Christianity in the Late Modern World* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010).

25 Weber, *Politics*, 407.

26 Weber, *Politics*, 399f.

27 Weber, *Politics*, 400.

28 Weber says something similar; see *Politics*, 417.

ure of good in all human societies), justifying grace (where salvation begins to redeem the moral image, making it possible for humans to imitate God), and finally, in sanctifying grace: conjecturing what holiness might look like in institutional form.

While Wesley never fully articulated these things to the extent expressed above, he did move aggressively into societal constructs (slavery, poverty, health-related concerns) with theological energies emanating from God's Trinitarian nature and the image of God concept.

IV Dietrich Bonhoeffer: The Lordship of Jesus Christ

Like Wesley, Dietrich Bonhoeffer's writings need to be understood within his immediate context as a German Lutheran theologian/pastor living during the time of liberal theology and the Weimar and Nazi regimes. Each of these definitive experiences marks Bonhoeffer's thoughts with regard to institutions and structures. For this article, I will limit my scope to his unfinished book, *Ethics*,[29] where he most fully lays out his thoughts on politics and institutions.

Perhaps the most important piece for interpreting Bonhoeffer relates to the lordship of Jesus Christ. Contra liberal theologians and the oppressive Nazi regime, Bonhoeffer sees the entire world through Jesus Christ. He says we cannot understand the world apart from Christ, and we cannot talk about Christ apart from the world. All of this is possible because of the incarnation of Jesus Christ, his death, and his resurrection, by which God speaks a resounding 'yes' to the goodness of the world through the incarnation, a decisive 'no' to the sinful world via the cross, and a final 'yes' to the world by means of Christ's exalted humanity.

All of this is captured in his often repeated paraphrase of Colossians 1:15ff, where the apostle Paul says of Christ: 'all things were created by him and for him, and have their existence only in him'.[30] For Bonhoeffer, this is the very message of humanity and thus the underlying meaning of the world. Contra the liberal theologians of his day, he brings a Christology to the world that is divine, human, and comprehensive of everything. There is nothing, not even the devil that stands independent from Christ.

Before arriving at how Bonhoeffer understands institutions, it is first necessary to see some of the theological anthropology in his writings. He moves from Christ to humanity through the incarnation, saying such things as 'God becomes man and we have to recognize that God wishes us men, too, to be real men';[31] or 'To be conformed to the Incarnate—that is to be a real man'.[32] This sounds quite different from the divinization proposed by the Eastern Church. But its rationale can be found in the conviction that God defines humanity and not the other way around.

His Christology thus leads to theological anthropology, which, as we will

---

29 Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Ethics*. Edited by Eberhard Bethge (New York: Collier Books, 1955).

30 Bonhoeffer, *Ethics*, 296.

31 Bonhoeffer, *Ethics*, 71.

32 Bonhoeffer, *Ethics*, 81.

see shortly, leads him into cosmological issues and eventually how he understands institutions. Hence it is no surprise that Bonhoeffer covers all of this terrain in *Ethics* before the end of the book where he takes up the issue of church and state.

How does anthropology move to cosmology? It is possible only through Christ. There are not two kingdoms, he argues, since that would introduce a reality independent of Christ, but one reality, and that is Christ.[33] He brings the two together while keeping them distinct from each other. Hence, he talks about the 'penultimate' and the 'ultimate' or the 'natural' and the 'supernatural'. While these might seem dichotomous, Bonhoeffer understands them coming together in Christ: 'Christ himself entered into the natural life, and it is only through the incarnation of Christ that the natural life becomes the penultimate which is directed towards the ultimate.'[34]

While he locates the basis for this in the incarnation, a fuller picture requires the cross and the resurrection. We need the totality of Christ to understand the totality of this world. 'In Christ we are offered the possibility of partaking in the reality of God and in the reality of the world, but not in the one without the other.'[35] Hence, he argues that there are not two kingdoms but one; not two different realities but one in Jesus Christ: 'The reality of Christ comprises the reality of the

world within itself;'[36] or, 'The purpose and aim of the dominion of Christ is not to make the worldly order godly or to subordinate it to the Church but to set it free for true worldliness.'[37]

With this as backdrop, we now arrive at Bonhoeffer's theology of institutions. He understands institutions such as marriage, work, and government as authorized by God, which means they all point ahead to their ultimate consummation in Jesus Christ. But each of these (what he calls 'mandates') is not the same. He understands the first two, marriage and labour, as divinely ordained in creation, while the third (government) emanates from their foundation.

Work is not just work, but participation in what God has made. Marriage is not just for the procreation of children, but also their education. With these enlarged understandings of 'work' and 'marriage' he then shows how the two lead to the mandate of government. In a powerful statement about the role of government he says:

> The divine mandate of government presupposes the divine mandates of labour and marriage. In the world which it rules, the governing authority finds already present the two mandates through which God the Creator exercises his creative power, and is therefore dependent on these. Government cannot itself produce life or values. It is not creative.[38]

This does not mean that government represents something inferior

---

33 Bonhoeffer, *Ethics*, 199–200. He says, 'If the secular becomes an independent realm by itself, then the fact of the world having been taken up into Christ is denied.'

34 Bonhoeffer, *Ethics*, 145.

35 Bonhoeffer, *Ethics*, 195.

36 Bonhoeffer, *Ethics*, 197.

37 Bonhoeffer, *Ethics*, 328–9.

38 Bonhoeffer, *Ethics*, 210.

for Bonhoeffer, only that he locates it coming out of the two creational mandates. Hence the state must never try to 'become the subject, the driving force' of labour, or marriage, since that would 'imperil gravely both the divine mandate of labour and its own divine mandate'.[39] Government arises from God and serves the purposes of Christ, which locates it in the world for the good of all. Christians do not know everything about the political realm, and thus must trust those with expertise to guide in these affairs, but the state will always seek to assert its own deification and the church must remind it of who orders the world.

How then is the church to witness to the state? It should never do so by trying to assume more territory in the world, since Christ has already claimed that for himself.[40] Christians bear witness to Christ through the 'yes' of the incarnation, while pointing toward the fullness of Christ who defines the world.

Bonhoeffer reminds Christians that they owe allegiance to the authorities, even to the point of paying taxes to an anti-Christian government.[41] Each person contributes to the larger whole through obedience and service. 'The "world" is thus the sphere of concrete responsibility which is given to us in and through Jesus Christ.'[42] But the cross also reminds us of God's 'no' to idolatry and autonomy and every effort to see the realms as independent of Christ. The church testifies to government about the ultimate reality that Christ defines the entire world.

> Her aim is not that government should pursue a Christian policy, enact Christian laws, etc., but that it should be true government in accordance with its own special task. Only the Church brings government to an understanding of itself.[43]

V John Howard Yoder: The 'powers' and the 'polis'

In looking at John Howard Yoder, I will largely contain my thoughts to one book, *The Christian Witness to the State*, where he lays out his fundamental argument for how Christians should engage the political realm.[44] It has become rather common for scholars to criticize Anabaptists of Yoder's mould, calling them sectarian pietists and faulting them for opposing the political realm and obscuring witness to institutions. Clearly, Yoder has such persons in his mind when he wrote this book. With energy, aplomb, and perhaps a flash of hubris, Yoder counters those stereotypes and shows why, how, and on what terms, the pacifist tradition

---

39 Bonhoeffer, *Ethics*, 210.

40 Bonhoeffer, *Ethics*, 202. He says, 'She [the Church] asks for no more space than she needs for the purpose of serving the world by bearing witness to Jesus Christ and to the reconciliation of the world with God through Him'.

41 Bonhoeffer, *Ethics*, 343.

42 Bonhoeffer, *Ethics*, 233.

43 Bonhoeffer, *Ethics*, 347.

44 John Howard Yoder, *The Christian Witness to the State* (Scottdale, PA: Herald Press, 1964). It has recently come to the attention of the public that Yoder victimized women during his life. I use Yoder in this article because of his insightfulness with regard to the subject material, but with sadness to, and awareness of, the troubling legacy he leaves behind with regard to how he treated women.

engages institutions such as the state.

He begins by talking about Christ's present reign over the 'powers', which in biblical language he roughly equates with 'the equivalent of the modern term structures'.[45] With Christ's reign, the gospel ('good news of the kingdom of God') has come near.

But what exactly is the gospel? He faults those who would so individualise the gospel as to treat it as something bartered or exchanged between persons, or those who would privatise it without taking into consideration its broader social (or even political) appeal. In Yoder's words,

> It is not the case that a witness to an individual, calling him to conversion with reference to his own personal guilt and the direction of his life, is biblically speaking evangelism whereas the witness either to groups or to persons in social responsibility, calling on them to change their dispositions and do in their offices what God would have them do, is something else.[46]

The gospel is not only for individuals but also larger groups; the gospel is not just a spiritual thing, but holds deeper institutional implications.

How do Christians witness to the state? For Yoder there is only one way and that is through the church, which Yoder describes as 'a society' or 'polis' functioning as the 'aftertaste of God's loving triumph on the cross and foretaste of His ultimate loving triumph in His kingdom'.[47]

At the heart of Yoder's theology therefore lies the church as an alternative community (or society) that lives out authentic Christian discipleship within her social, economic, and political identity, showing the world what love looks like within social arrangements. He understands the church as more than a moral rudder, but as the ultimate meaning of history: demonstrating to the world where history is headed. The state can define things only temporally, through coercion; the church defines things eternally, through love.

Unlike theologians from other traditions, Yoder does not see politics as intrinsic to the created order, but as a kind of this-worldly necessity arising from the ways sin distorts power within social relations. Here and elsewhere, he argues that the 'sword' cannot be part of God's original intent.[48] This also colours his reading of the state, as that part of society that wields 'force as ultimate authority',[49] revealing certain biases in his overall thinking. However, the state still has a purpose in the world, as an 'order of providence' in society.

Its function, according to Yoder, is to prevent evil and provide for a kind of 'ordering' of society, serving as a 'historical mediation between continued rebellion and the orderliness of the kingdom to come'.[50] He acknowledges the state will never live up to the standards of the Lordship of Christ. At best, the church can help the state better serve society 'when the political apparatus is held in check and where the

---

45 Yoder, *The Christian*, 8.
46 Yoder, *The Christian*, 23.
47 Yoder, *The Christian*, 10.

48 *The Christian*, 34.
49 *The Christian*, 12.
50 *The Christian*, 33–4.

church is thereby most free to carry out her first task of evangelization and discipleship and her second task of witness to the social order'.[51]

This results in the tensions between the realms where he tries to articulate a specific kind of tension or dualism, not founded upon arbitrary delineations of church and state, but between faith and unbelief.[52] Yoder calls this a 'duality without dualism' to keep the distinction, but allowing for certain overlap that allows the church to nevertheless engage the state.[53] How well he manages these semantic gymnastics is up to the reader to discern, but his basic point is an important one: there are many different kinds of dualisms, not all noxious in character.

How then can the church engage the state? Foremost by her 'inner life', which is not some kind of privatised, separate reality but something lived openly before the world. Here Yoder envisions love rather than hate, egalitarian constructs rather than hierarchies, and the Lordship of Jesus Christ defining social, economic, and political relations.

Flowing from this he proceeds to describe the church's role to the state through a rich variety of images, including where she functions as a 'scaffolding service'[54] or 'moral osmosis'.[55] The church has historically contributed these roles with regard to alternative structures in society, such as with schools, hospitals, or relief agencies.

But the church can also speak directly and when it does so, she must speak with conviction, consistent with her own behaviour (for example, not speaking against the state where she herself has problems, as in the case of racial discrimination), and only when she has something to significant to say.[56] He sees these changes happening incrementally: 'The world can be challenged, at the most, on one point at a time, to take one step in the right direction, to approximate in a slightly greater degree the righteousness of love.'[57]

Finally, Yoder understands the state as made up of people. Witness to the state must be witness to people. 'We must not think of society or the state as some sort of vast and chaotic multitude, but rather as a great number of individuals each responsible for his own response to what he himself hears.'[58] Here we find his pastoral, evangelistic heart seen most clearly, along with continued vigilance not to allow the statesperson to occupy too important a role in history. Talking about the statesperson, he says:

> He needs neither to be fawned over or to be feared as if he were truly strong, nor to be threatened as if he were an adversary, neither to be blamed for his failures nor to be praised for his noble intentions. He needs, like any man, to be respected, to be esteemed worthy of personal concern, to be invited to discover—whether within his office or beyond its bounds, he can know

---

51 *The Christian*, 40.

52 *The Christian*, 29.

53 *The Christian*, 31.

54 *The Christian*, 11.

55 *The Christian*, 21.

56 *The Christian*, 21–2.

57 *The Christian*, 39.

58 *The Christian*, 24.

only later—a way more excellent, more human, both for his subject and for himself.[59]

Ultimately any engagement with the state is an engagement with a person: a human person, someone for whom Christ died.

With Yoder, we find the centrality of the lordship of Jesus Christ, the instrument of church, the ethic of the kingdom (seen most clearly in the Sermon on the Mount), along with important distinctions between the church and state, yet never wavering in his commitment to engage the state, especially through the statesperson with the gospel: a gospel of love, peace, and hope that will someday define history.

VI Global Voices: Emmanuel Katongole, Vinoth Ramachandra, Andrew Walls

I conclude this article by returning to the alternate map of the universe I first encountered in the village in Tanzania. Much of what I outlined through the previous theological discussion largely emanates from a western reading of the cosmos, where there exists a *perceived* distance between an individual and an institution, along with a 'secular imaginary' that colours how people think about institutions. However, this is not so for people in other parts of the world. In what follows, I will try to construct an alternative reading of institutions by drawing upon the work of Sri Lankan theologian Vinoth Ramachandra, Emmanuel Katongole, and the eminent scholar of 'World Christi-

anity', Andrew Walls.[60]

Andrew Walls talks readily, almost eagerly, about the different maps of the universe we find in places like Africa. As mentioned earlier, these maps provide a wide range of movement between material and spiritual realities. If the west struggles to move outside of its inherited dichotomies, then 'the real strength of Christianity in Africa', Walls argues, 'may prove to be its capacity for independence of Enlightenment categories'.[61]

In order to tap these resources, the global south must deal with three important things: (1) its colonial past, especially in regard to how this past has influenced how Christians think about structures in society; (2) its spiritual legacy, and particularly the 'powers' which occupies such an important biblical if not cultural basis for engaging institutions; and (3) creativity, as people in the global south chart a course to craft new societal realities. Let me draw upon the works of these three authors to develop each of these in turn.

Much ink has been spilled about the horrific legacy colonialism left around the world. I won't chronicle this sordid past, but use Katongole's *The Sacrifice of Africa* as a launching pad to begin this discussion.[62] He starts with the story of Africa: a story largely writ-

---

59 *The Christian*, 14–5.

60 I regret not including a voice from Latin America. Admittedly, people from this part of the world have had more experience than many others in thoughtfully engaging sinful structures. I am, however, simply drawing upon the resources I am most familiar with.

61 Walls, *The Cross-Cultural Process*, 122.

62 Emmanuel Katongole, *The Sacrifice of Africa: A Political Theology for Africa* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2010).

ten by abuse, violence, war, and the devaluing of life, which Katongole explains has become the story of the continent. As an ethicist, he argues that: 'Christian social ethics must uncover the underlying stories of the key social institutions in Africa that affect both their performance and the types of characters they produce'.[63]

Retracing the story of western engagement with Africa will be painful, he contends, but we must nevertheless piece our way through the 'layers of memory',[64] through the official scripts, but no less the unofficial texts such as in poetry and song,[65] to see the lasting effect of modernity in Africa: especially how these have given rise to the present institutions. He says,

> I began to see that ideals like 'democracy,' 'development,' 'civilization,' and 'progress' have become such tantalizing but misleading notions, forming the basic imagination canvas yet obscuring reality. They have become the lies that both African leaders and social ethicists desperately want to believe.'[66]

The way forward, he argues, is by telling a different story. We counter the ignominious past of colonialism by living a new kind of future filled with hope; we stand before existing structures carved out by the western myth of the nation-state by positing new institutions emanating from the African imagination; and we oppose the 'secular imaginary' of the West with a 'sacred imaginary' that feasts upon Africa's spiritual resources.

These new stories, Katongole maintains, do not take us away from theology but more fully into it, especially as the church embodies them before the world. He says, 'All the realities of the Christian tradition—the Scriptures, prayer, doctrine, worship, Baptism, the Eucharist, the sacraments—point to and reenact a compelling story that should claim the whole of our lives.'[67]

Second, as suggested by Katongole, people from the global south must lead in the creation of new institutions through spiritual resources. This is one area where Katongole, Walls, and Ramachandra all agree. But how does one counter a 'secular imaginary' with a 'sacred imaginary' without running the risk of spiritualizing everything and thus ending up with a Gnostic, vaporous form of Christianity that has nothing to do with economic or political realities? This is a concern for all three authors.

Katongole criticizes the ways Christians in Africa have used spiritual resources for countering the continent's ills, describing these in terms of the 'spiritual paradigm', 'pastoral paradigm', and 'justice paradigm' in which all three operate upon the fundamental belief that Christianity is a 'religion' and thus distinct from the social, material, economic or political realities.[68] By demarcating theological resources in contradistinction to institutions, Christians implicitly accept the force of structures upon their lives.

Ramachandra outlines a different

---

63 Katongole, *The Sacrifice*, 3.
64 Katongole, *The Sacrifice*, 12.
65 Katongole, *The Sacrifice*, 13.
66 Katongole, *The Sacrifice*, 14.

67 Katongole, *The Sacrifice*, 61–2.
68 Katongole, *The Sacrifice*, 33–41.

danger.[69] He sees the 'sacred' as a potential threat, in which it adheres to a particular structural reality and essentially 'sacralises' it. We see this in the ways religious leaders sanction particular political or economic ideologies; we see it also when political leaders use religious language. In the face of these predilections, Ramachandra advances the value of the secular, arguing even for a wide variety of 'contextual secularisms'.

Of course, Ramachandra's view of the 'secular' assumes a different character from the kinds seen in the west, where he grounds it in creation, humanity, and the person of Christ. Upon such a foundation, he moves readily into social, political, and economic facets of life, saying: 'Ultimately, "development" is not about economic growth, but the empowerment of all people so that their created gifts and capacities can flourish for the well-being of the whole society.'[70] And later: 'The theologian's task is to enable the Church to respond Christianly to the world it indwells.'[71]

Perhaps Ramachandra envisions something like de-sacralisation to take place in order to re-sacralise life, but in a way that takes seriously its secular worth. His project learns from the West, but appropriates the gifts found within the global south for a richer, fuller engagement with institutions of life.

Moving toward the future, societies in the global south need all the theological resources found within Scriptures to tell a different story; they require all the resources of their 'sacred imaginary' to guide them into life; and they need the full scope of imaginative energies to craft new institutions for the good of all, but especially those who daily feel the sting of poverty. To do so, Andrew Walls draws upon the biblical language of 'powers' to suggest that Africans need to move spiritually and materially into such realms as 'markets', 'governments', 'suprastate organizations', but no less 'ethnicity and nationality'.[72] He explains what this might mean for African Christianity:

> Our existing theologies of church and state were carved out of the experience of Western Christendom, and were never meant to deal with anything as complicated as the networks of political and economic structures that will characterize the twenty-first century. I suspect there will be a special responsibility lying upon African theologians for constructing the new theologies of political and economic realm we need.[73]

To move in this direction, we need the full resources of theology, but no less the full resources of the Body of Christ around the world.

VII Conclusions:

Where does this leave us? As I have shown, evangelicals both struggle to develop theologies of institutions, while, at the same time, possess a

---

69 Vinoth Ramachandra, 'Learning from Modern European Secularism: A View from the Third World Church', *European Journal of Theology* 12:1 (2003), 35–48.

70 Ramachandra, 'Learning', 39.

71 Ramachandra, 'Learning', 39.

72 Walls, *The Cross-Cultural Process*, 112–3.

73 Walls, *The Cross-Cultural Process*, 113.

wealth of resources from which to engage this important facet of life. I have highlighted Wesley's trinitarian foundation and the way it moves into the natural, moral, and political facets of the image of God. We looked at how Bonhoeffer understands institutions through the Lordship of Jesus Christ, taking us by the hand into all of life, but no less the secular realm. In Yoder, we see the value of the church as a *polis*, or alternative community for witnessing to the public realm.

From the global south, we highlighted the need to tell a different story from the prevailing narratives of modernity, but one where this new story does not necessarily involve the rejection of modernity, but its renewal, especially through a more integrated understanding of spiritual and material realms. For some, any mention of a new form of modernity smacks of neocolonialism, or a return to a failed project. But as Ramachandra points out, modernity arose from the wells of the Judeo-Christian heritage with its implicit groundings upon human rights, equality, order, and freedom.

What might institutions look like if Christians returned to these theological moorings as they engage the public realm, but no less the institutions and structures of society? This is Ramachandra's question as well.

No one, whether Christian or non-Christian, who cares about such human emancipation can rejoice in the 'end of modernity' chorus emanating from certain quarters of the Western world. But we also stand in great need of discernment lest we identify the 'spirit of the age' with the Holy Spirit, the Spirit of truth who mediates the reality of the risen Lord in the midst of historical change and uncertainty. If, indeed modernity is the prodigal son of the Christian narrative, then what would the return of the prodigal—the 'recapitulation' (*apokatalassein*, Eph 1:10) of modern society in Christ—involve?[74]

As evangelicals, we have an abundance of theological resources to engage the structures of modernity. We do so not by rejecting them, or by colluding with them. We say 'yes' to institutions through the Trinity, creation, and the incarnation of Jesus Christ, while we say 'no' to their ideologies, especially as they twist and contort under the influence of sin. And by saying 'yes' and 'no' we find them ever open to the lordship of Jesus Christ and the flourishing of God's intents for the world.

---

74 Ramachandra, Learning', 39.