

## **Work, Vocation, and Ministry: Theologies of Call in the United Church of Canada, 1945-1980**

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One of my former colleagues was once remarking on his vocation as an economist. It seemed an unusual career, as he had a good theological pedigree – he was the son of two generations of Anglican priests. His response has haunted me as I prepared this paper: “Economics is theology of the fallen world.” This paper is an effort to gain an historical sense of some significant changes within theology – both that which is aimed at the city of God, and that which is profoundly shaped by the city of humans as the United Church of Canada re-imagined, revised and reorganized its understanding of ministry within its “second generation” of ministry – a period after the Second World War to 1980. This era, often referred to as Fordist by economists, is characterized by industrialized, assembly-line production, and is also one of economic growth and stability within North America. While I am not suggesting that economic restructuring was the only force shaping theologies of ministry at that time, I will suggest that it was a significant one.<sup>1</sup> It will be the aim of this paper to give a snapshot of some of the ways in which the economy of this period in Canada encroached upon the *oikos*, the household of faith, within the United Church of Canada. This encroachment affected the manner in which ministry and work were construed as the emergence of a new professional class arose. Yet, this picture is not a fatalistic one: while one can surely see the traces of Adam Smith’s “invisible hand” of the market<sup>2</sup> upon theologies of ministry at that time, there emerge also some formidable instances of theological and organizational resistance. Finally, I would like to

suggest some theological implications of these observations by briefly considering our own period of challenges and changes in labour participation, and consider how theologies of ministry within the United Church of Canada might offer an alternative to these pressures.

The period after the Second World War was one of tremendous economic change and growth. “Fordism,” a term originally coined by Antonio Gramsci, refers to a specific type of capitalist production and consumption, in which productivity is maximized through the specialized labour forms, aimed at mechanized power, as in assembly-line production, a type of work segmentation that became normative in Henry Ford’s auto industry. The displacement of specialized and crafts-based labour gave rise not only to increased alienation in Marx’s terms, but also to an increased bureaucratization of management, as management became a class unto itself in the surveillance of worker productivity. Increased consumption and productivity offered, for a time, a rise in real wages among the working class, and the conditions of work became ones that focused upon intense productivity, while working conditions were generally improved through the activity of labour unions, which themselves often cooperated with management in order to maximalize individual worker benefits. While Fordism refers to a specific set of economic and social reproduction, it is its corollary form of labour management, generally referred to as Taylorism, which became dominant in the organization of workers.<sup>3</sup> Taylorism derives from the writings of Frederick W. Taylor, the first management expert, who, at the turn of the twentieth century, developed a set of ideas designed to get employees in manufacturing industries to produce more efficiently. His term for this collection of strategies was “scientific management.” In order to implement his ideas, Frederick Taylor divided manufacturing into several simple tasks. Instead of doing many different things, workers in Taylorized factories executed the same simple tasks over and over. This not only increased production, but also reduced an employer’s need for skilled labor. For this reason, employers could generally decrease their wage costs.

Clearly, the logic was one of production within a *system* or machine, and thus the stratification of work also became increasingly evident. The separation of manual labour from intellectual labour, itself historically unprecedented,<sup>4</sup> characterized work relations in the classical dyad between management professionals and (alienated) workers in assembly-line productions. However, not all of this was bad news to the worker. While there was a decrease in skilled labour, or craft, this system was accompa-

nied, in general, by job security and benefits, for the (predominately male) worker. Furthermore, this period of economic growth and prosperity supported the expansion of social services, as a means of mitigating against fluctuations within the economy. As Kenneth Norrie and Douglas Owrarn describe Canadian labour in this period:

The period from 1945 to 1973 was exceptional in one way, if in no other. Most of the social policies and regional-development commitments now taken for granted as an essential part of the Canadian fabric had their beginnings in these years. Federal and provincial governments played a relatively small role in these areas before the Great Depression. Welfare was a private responsibility, assisted by churches and other charitable institutions, and, as a last resort, by municipalities. Attitudes changed significantly during the Great Depression, however; the state was forced to take a more active role in the managing of the economy and in providing relief to the unfortunate.<sup>5</sup>

For ministers in the post-war era, this period of increased state-directed social security resulted in a loss of existential security in the need for one of its traditional roles: that is the care of the poor. Historian Ramsay Cook's insights into the challenge to Christian identity through the secular welfare state are germane even up to the period being examined.<sup>6</sup> No longer were ministers and the church called upon to offer social assistance to the poor: a new class of professionals was called upon to do that, and the government became responsible for the implementation and maintenance of social programs.

The crisis of identity of the minister was heightened as a corollary feature of post-war economic structuring, which included the emergence of a new professional class that would become servants of the new social order. As church-run charities gave way to secular helping agencies, ministers (as helping agents) took their place among other social workers.<sup>7</sup> Such change resulted in a new imperative to re-define and justify the role of the minister within a broader realm of helping agents in public life. What is to be noted is that the public life that included the politician, the social worker, and the tax collector also included the minister who was now responsible for staking out his particular function within the broader framework of society. In other words, the church was no longer a unique public which the minister cared for, but was instead incorporated into a larger whole aimed at the functioning of a broader society.

The idea of functioning is central to Fordist economics. The worker, like the components of a product, becomes a part of the properly-ordered *machine*, and his or her aims are intended to produce a product that will contribute in its unique way to the output of a smoothly-operating and efficient whole. Each workplace was to perform specific ends that were idiosyncratic to the industry itself. Yet society as a whole could also be viewed mechanistically, as each discrete industry contributed uniquely to a well-ordered, functional social order. The church thus takes its place as one domain within this order, and, divested as it was of biblical and theological confidence, was forced to interpret its own aims within this overarching teleology. Therefore, the minister took up his role in relation to other “ministers” within the church, and, in society, to a host of other professional helpers. Ministry itself became redefined to include not only ministry of Word, sacrament and pastoral care, but other specializations. As the introduction to the 23<sup>rd</sup> General Council *Report on The Ministry in the Twentieth Century* urges, the Church must now “. . . define the place of specialized ministry in relationship to the ministry of Word and Sacraments (board secretaries, counselors, chaplains, deaconesses, certified employed churchmen, Christian education directors, radio and television specialists.”<sup>8</sup>

While there can be a great deal of debate around the merits of the expansion of ministry to include other aspects of ordained ministry, the purpose of critical examination here is simply to consider the extent the language of the new marketplace was appropriated in so doing. Consider again the markedly unbiblical language of the Report’s recommendations as it advocates new ways of thinking about ministry for the twentieth century:

It is recommended that there be one professional “order of ministry” whose function is to enable the whole Church to perform its ministry. Members of the order of ministry shall be educated, trained and commissioned or ordained to serve in the following capacities . . .<sup>9</sup>

The performance of the whole church required the proper functioning of each of its members, whose work could be parsed out and overseen in accordance with the new managerial mindset. The Appendix to the Report, titled “Schema,” offers some terse recommendations for the implementation of the new model of ministry, including the contract-like “Check List of Shared Responsibilities,”<sup>10</sup> which included the ministry of perennials

and shrubs (15), and TV antennas (20h). The interesting theological point is the neat and straightforward flow of such minutiae a mere three steps removed from the Report's ecclesiology, titled (1) "What is the Church for?"

The Twenty-Third General Council adopted the Commission on Ministry's Report, while referring several of its sections to the subsequent General Council, which by 1972, had not managed to shake off the managerial mind-set. Under the title, "Professional Ministries," the Executive Committee of the General Council affirms:

It is to be understood that the ministry in the twentieth century requires varieties of expression beyond that traditionally associated with these functions:

Proclamation of the gospel [sic] to the Church and the world should be understood not only as words spoken from the pulpit, but also, for example, the production of radio and TV programs and other contemporary means . . . The pastoral function is exercised within the congregational setting, and also in counselling as a specialized function, broadly interpreted and carried on in secular settings such as general or psychiatric hospitals, penitentiaries, etc. The representative and liturgical functions are not confined to formal church services, but may be exercised in a variety of situations according to the need and opportunity.<sup>11</sup>

Clearly, the managerial model of ministry in the post-war period became increasingly identified with producing specific outcomes based upon quantifiable goals and measurements. This view is problematic on at least two counts. First, it substitutes the biblical ideal of the Kingdom of God, a future that is open-ended and contingent upon God's disruptive grace, with a flattened picture of the Church as a society whose chief aim is its own preservation. Further, it subordinates the people of God to the functioning of this machine – persons become functional specialists. The reciprocity and nuance of concrete relationships within a sacramental community are reduced to rigid and one-dimensional roles. This managerial mind-set is, of course, not exclusive to the baby-boomer era. As contemporary theologian Michael Hanby writes:

Assuming that we "ought" to be happy, [therapeutic] techniques – help us to "manage" loss, to put it where it no longer exists, namely

“behind us” in the past. This is to say that the managerial mindset, in its therapeutic guise, creates in our souls the same relationship to time and to the past that it produces in our bodies in its industrial guise. Grief and loss are best avoided, but, failing that, they are obstacles to be managed and overcome. So we institute psychological strategies to emancipate ourselves from the past just as our hyper-mobility as workers drives us from home and from those institutions – like friendship, marriage, and child-rearing – through which we make bodily commitments.<sup>12</sup>

If I am right that the “invisible hand” of the economy has far-reaching effects upon the ways in which the language, policies and practices of ministry are shaped, is there any hope for an alternative? It is fascinating to note that in the wake of the re-structuring of ministry within the United Church of Canada, a group of prairie ministers, whether they realized it or not, presented both a robust critique and alternative to the professional ministry. This group, formed in the 1970s in Saskatchewan, called themselves the “Christian Workers’ Collective,” and they lobbied for, among other things, a parity plan for ministers, as well as better working conditions for all those under the employ of the United Church of Canada. While one might be tempted to think that these ministers were merely substituting the language of Marxism for that of Fordism, consider the analysis in a document titled “A Minority Report on the Commission for Salaries,”<sup>13</sup> a report commissioned by the General Council of 1974:

...the biblical Word judges our cultural value systems, particularly our ideology of the marketplace.

... talents in ministry are God-given gifts and the Church has every right to expect us to use our God-given gifts to the full extent of our abilities.<sup>14</sup>

Ministry is re-framed in this document, not as profession, but as vocation. Vocation, as a theological principle, could not be reduced to function or to the “ideology of the marketplace.” While the Christian Workers’ Collective held that one of its principal tasks was to advocate a parity system, this was viewed principally as a means of breaking of the idolatry of success-*cum*-wages, and moving toward a more equitable stewardship of the church’s resources. The document, “Theological Principles on Which the Parity System is Based,” contains four single-spaced pages of

theological argument for the parity system, but the most notable is one that offers a marked contrast to the confidence and the utilitarianism of those previously examined:

Our hope would lie not in the parity system itself, which would be imperfect, but that to which the parity system would bear witness, an attempt to express the kingdom values in a corporate way. This is the fourth theological principle on which the parity system is based. As the church is called to be a foretaste of the kingdom where the greatest of all is the servant to all and the highest reward is knowing that we do His will, so within the church those who are charged with responsibility of equipping God's people for work in His Service have the opportunity to be pioneers in obedience and to bear witness in corporate action to our faith in the reality of kingdom life.<sup>15</sup>

It is worth considering in our own era of economic restructuring how the language of ministry is co-opted by market forces. In a technology-driven economy one may do well to critique contemporary theologies of ministry discourse as the church speaks too fluently the language of contract-based employment, flex-time, multi-tasking and virtual workplaces. While I am not suggesting that ministry ought never change, I would suggest that, like our exemplary Saskatchewan radicals, that it is best done with an ear that is finely tuned to the cadences and the nuances of biblical speech, a speech robust enough to resist the economy's ever changing and ever-ringing siren call.

### ***Endnotes***

1. I do not intend to engage in a sustained Marxist reading of this era, suggesting that all social (and theological) change can be reduced to economics. Rather, I hope to suggest something more akin to a postmodern reading of the times, which examines the discursive features of a period which tended to be dominated by the logic of the dominant modes of production. As Frederic Jameson writes: "I have felt, however, that it was only in the light of some conception of a dominant cultural logic or hegemonic norm that genuine difference could be measured and assessed. I am very far from feeling that all cultural production today is postmodern in the broad sense I will be conferring on this term. The postmodern is, however, the force field in which very different kinds of cultural impulses – what Raymond Williams has usefully termed "residual" and "emergent" forms of cultural production – must make their way. If we do not achieve some general sense of a cultural dominant,

then we fall back into a view of present history as sheer heterogeneity, random difference, a coexistence of a host of distinct forces whose effectivity is undecidable. At any rate, this has been the political spirit in which the following analysis was devised: to project some conception of a new systematic cultural norm and its reproduction in order to reflect more adequately on the most effective forms of any radical cultural politics today” (Frederic Jameson, *Postmodernism, or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* [Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2003], 6).

2. “Every individual necessarily labours to render the annual revenue of the society as great as he can. He generally neither intends to promote the public interest, nor knows how much he is promoting it . . . By preferring the support of domestic to that of foreign industry, he intends only his own security; and by directing that industry in such a manner as its produce may be of the greatest value, he intends only his own gain, and he is in this, as in many other cases, *led by an invisible hand* to promote an end which was no part of his intention. Nor is it always the worse for society that it was no part of his intention. By pursuing his own interest he frequently promotes that of the society more effectually than when he really intends to promote it. I have never known much good done by those who affected to trade for the public good” [italics mine] (Adam Smith, *The Wealth of Nations*, Volume IV [Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1976], 477).
3. See, for example, Frederick Taylor’s injunction: “. . . [I]t should also be perfectly clear that the greatest permanent prosperity for the workman, coupled with the greatest prosperity for the employer, can be brought about only when the work of the establishment is done with the smallest combined expenditure of human effort, plus nature’s resources, plus the cost for the use of capital in the shape of machines, buildings, etc. Or, to state the same thing in a different way: that the greatest prosperity can exist only as the result of the greatest possible productivity of the men and machines of the establishment that is, *when each man and each machine are turning out the largest possible output; because unless your men and your machines are daily turning out more work than others around you, it is clear that competition will prevent your paying higher wages to your workmen than are paid to those of your competitor*. And what is true as to the possibility of paying high wages in the case of two companies competing close beside one another is also true as to whole districts of the country and even as to nations which are in competition. In a word, that maximum prosperity can exist only as the result of maximum productivity” [italics mine] (Frederick Taylor, *The Principles of Scientific Management*, originally published 1911, <<http://melbecon.unimelb.edu.au/het/taylor/sciman.htm>> (19 December 2006)).



4. See Hannah Arendt on the “division of labor”: “[The modern-day division of labor] can be so classified only under the assumption that society must be conceived as one single subject, the fulfillment of whose needs are then subdivided by “an invisible hand” among its members” (Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition*, 2nd ed. [Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996], 48).
5. Kenneth Norrie and Douglas Owsram, *History of the Canadian Economy* (Toronto: Harcourt Brace, 1996), 428- 29.
6. See Ramsay Cook’s pithy description of the unforeseen consequence of the Social Gospel: “That union of the sacred and secular, so ardently wished for by the Christian reformers anxious to regenerate the social order, unexpectedly acted as the accommodating midwife to the birth of secular society” (Ramsay Cook, *The Regenerators: Social Criticism in Late Victorian English Canada* [Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1987], 231).
7. As the authors of *Voices and Visions: 65 Years of the United Church of Canada* note: “In the fifties, members of the church, like most Canadians, were caught up in a new project of reconstructing a world in which was had been put behind us and technology was creating a new future. The United Church records show that we too supported the strengthening of a federal government as a means of creating a larger base on which to exercise and facilitate our collective neighbourliness. It was a watershed of sorts. Prior to the war, most of the social welfare efforts in the country had been carried out by private organizations, including the church; the government had been too weak to provide much security. It was as if before the war the man found beaten by the side of the road in Jesus’ story was picked up by the Samaritan and taken to an inn, which he himself owned and operated. During the 1950s, the Samaritan would have taken him to an inn owned and operated by all of us through federal and provincial governments. The Samaritan’s taxes would have paid for the neighbour’s care, but the means of delivering the care definitively changed” (John Webster Grant et al., *Voices and Visions: 65 Years of the United Church of Canada* [Toronto: The United Church Publishing House, 1990], 87).
8. 23<sup>rd</sup> General Council Records of Proceedings, August 27 – Sept. 4, 1968, “The Ministry in the Twentieth Century” (Toronto: United Church of Canada General Council, 1968), 228.
9. 23<sup>rd</sup> General Council Records of Proceedings, 228.
10. 23<sup>rd</sup> General Council Records of Proceedings, 262.
11. 24<sup>th</sup> General Council Records of Proceedings, August 27 – Sept. 4, 1968, “The Ministry in the Twentieth Century” (Toronto: United Church of Canada General Council, 1970), 131.

12. Michael Hanby, "Giving Grief to Management," *The Blackwell Companion to Christian Ethics*, eds. Stanley Hauerwas and Samuel Wells (Malden: Blackwell, 2004), 243.
13. This document was penned by a commission established by the 26<sup>th</sup> General Council of the United Church of Canada. While many of its members were also founding members of the "Christian Workers' Collective" (most notably theologian Ben Smillie), the groups are not identical.
14. Ben Smillie, et al., "A Minority Report on the Commission for Salaries," A Report Commissioned by the 26<sup>th</sup> General Council of the United Church of Canada, 1974, courtesy of Rev. Paul Campbell (former Conference President), personal records, 11.
15. Christian Workers' Collective, "Theological Principles on which the Parity System is Based," 1979, Saskatchewan Conference, courtesy of Rev. Paul Campbell (former Conference President), personal correspondence, 4.