

The Church and Capitalism: Building for Systemic Change

Robert Gordon (April 2012)

Recent experiences with the Occupy encampments were outside of our usual comfort zones and ways of operating, representing a different process for formulating social justice campaigns than most were used to. The reality of what was occurring during recent months is incredibly complex and nuanced, but if nothing else it is one that forces us to articulate a response that encapsulates the current socioeconomic context with an updated view of grassroots mobilisation and citizenship. There are many who feel it is the obligation of faith-based institutions to fully support popular calls for justice that Occupy represented, but in order to do so we must clearly and carefully articulate the manner in which these processes can interface with more traditional structures for change. It is a call that must be heeded, but it is not one that can be taken without a proper sense of the responsibility that arises once a course of action is decided upon. What I wanted to discuss with you today was how our Church institutions and related organisations can help people come to terms with some of the anxieties that we are all facing, whilst also actively formulating the new structural paradigms required in a manner that is relevant, effective and sustainable.

Amongst many other things, the 2008 financial crisis has been portrayed as a breakdown of the sense-making narratives that lie at the heart of modernity and, for many, our construction of personal identity. The Occupy movement was the manifestation of a response to this breakdown, and I wanted to begin by examining the fundamental aspects of the movement that are relevant to the way that we as people of faith, belonging to wide-reaching institutions, might seek to respond to this latest call for justice and equality.

If we were to examine the media portrayal, these recent protests are seen as a struggle between rich and poor - the primary issue being one of wealth disparity and the dominant narrative of neoliberal capitalism. Although a fair representation of the motivations of many drawn to Occupy, it should be recognised that these grievances ultimately point to a much deeper social issue: which is the distribution of power and the creation of authority. It's important to understand Occupy as an experiment in participatory democracy rather than merely an anti-capitalist campaign with set agendas. An often heard criticism is that the protestors didn't have a clear set of demands that were easily definable, nor did they offer solutions to the ones they did raise. Although valid concerns, it is more valuable to focus on recognising the attempt to set up a process through which society could create consensus-based agendas; as opposed to dictating what those agendas would be from the outset and rallying support around them as other traditional organisations would do. It is arguable whether or not this initial ethos was observed as things developed, but it is certainly because of this democratic process that Occupy comes across as something unique - and it was this inclusive aspect that drew people to it and created a sense of passion around its initial stages.

In a pure, ideological sense Occupy is about participation instigated through the concept of general assemblies and the communal authority that they represent. These people's assemblies are an attempt at consensus decision-making that seeks to provide equal footing to all voices involved, regardless of political or financial clout. When they work well, they are empowering things to witness and take part in. The collectivist mentality can allow for outcomes that are far greater than the sum of its parts, and the ability for strangers to come together to discuss deep-seated issues is an avenue of discourse that we have lost in many areas of modern society. The lack of these

avenues promotes social disconnection and disenfranchisement, which lead to the sense of betrayal and distrust that many individuals attracted to Occupy feel. It is for this reason that no matter what we might think about the Occupy movement and its effectiveness, we have to take its existence very seriously because it is an indication of underlying issues in our social frameworks that *must* be properly addressed rather than rhetorically side-stepped. We must take it seriously, not least of which because it's this disenfranchisement that culminated in the collapse of the social contract witnessed in the devastation of the riots last year. We cannot allow ourselves to be comforted by dismissing such behaviour as resulting merely from the 'thuggish', 'criminal' or 'lower classes' of society and relying upon imprisonment - for to do so causes these problems to become further embedded in our local communities rather than attempting to navigate away from them.

In order to overcome this growing sense of disenfranchisement, we must seek to recreate a sense of participation in society and a feeling of personal investment in the resulting outcomes. Whilst pursuing this goal, we must also bear in mind the many pitfalls that result from being overly emotive and oppositional; as is often the case in the high-energy environment of a protest movement. We must be careful not to forego civil liberties in the pursuit of an imagined utopia, nor alternatively strive to break down social structures that have proven to be effective means of distributing goods and services to those who need or desire them. In other words, we must temper our idealism with pragmatism; set attainable goals and the strategies for achieving them; enter into conversations that have a structure for transformation rather than merely a platform for disapproval; and ultimately engage in a proactive systemic change that enables us to overcome the challenges of the 21st century without oppressing or alienating large cross-sections of the population.

So the question becomes, how can we play our part in achieving this? The response must be that we further integrate the highly successful and wide-ranging programmes that are already in place and continue to expand the message of social and economic integrity that they champion. Although the events of recent months might have provided a catalyst for renewed effort, we mustn't lose sight of the fact that any viable solution requires long-term strategies that work upon iterative thinking. Now is not the time to drastically change course in the hopes that by doing so we will come across some miraculous panacea that will solve the challenges we face. At this stage we must not be afraid of passionate response, but it's also of vital importance to craft well-planned, strategic efforts that move beyond emotive patterns and into sustainable practical implementations.

I would suggest in brief three aspects of our work as faith-based institutions that can assist greatly in this process. First, we must raise the economic literacy of clergy and other church-based positions. Second, we should examine our church infrastructure and renew our appreciation for how it can bring about widespread systemic change. Finally, we must strengthen both local and global collaboration and cohesion in order to ensure that we act together where necessary and use our collective weight to overcome barriers that are otherwise insurmountable. These three overarching aspects do not dictate what changes must occur, but instead focus on the structures needed to achieve change. In most regards, we already have them ready and available; and what is required now is to focus our efforts to ensuring that they act in tandem towards the righteous and ecumenical goals that we seek.

To begin with, raising the economic literacy of clergy should be considered a top priority. They must be able to respond to questions from parishioners and also to challenges put forward by those who

think the Church - in a broad sense - should not have anything to say about finance, business or economics. We must articulate and build the bridge between the theology of money and wealth and the modern context of capitalist enterprise, and do so in a manner that is accessible and inspiring. We can no longer be 'intimidated by expertise' – as Archbishop Rowan Williams referred to it - but at the same time should not feel that we need to be technical experts to talk about money and the power that it has in our lives today for we already have at our disposal a rich body of thought that deals directly with many of the underlying issues we face today.

By raising the financial literacy of our clergy and through them parishioners and local communities, we are equipping ourselves with the tools needed to bring about greater engagement with the direction that society takes. A new language must be created that enables the two spheres of theology and economy to become unified once more in order to navigate what are tricky and sometimes very personal topics of discussion. Otherwise, we face a period of transition based predominately on emotional responses to crisis situations that can have far-reaching negative consequences that are difficult to undo. Ownership of our society's future must be provided to as broad-based a constituency as possible, and it is here that the second suggestion I would like to make comes into play.

Our Church institutions provide us with an ideal infrastructure for social change predicated on a mandate of equality, and we must find a way to take advantage of this possibility with what can often be limited resources. Enabling community conversations in parishes should be seen as an important aspect of how we utilise our Church infrastructure to ensure that we become a relevant and effective tool for local empowerment and issues of mutual concern. By coupling our mission of faith with social justice initiatives we can mobilise vast cross-sections of society for causes that require critical mass in order to become effective vehicles for change. Particular examples such as Fairtrade and the Living Wage campaign, to name but two, are examples where faith communities have been at the forefront of innovation in these areas that have brought about proven, measurable results. We must be emboldened by the recent energy around participatory democracy and its links with social justice issues, and see this as an opportunity to renew the participation that our communities are capable of through the infrastructure that our institutions already have in place.

The final suggestion that I would like to put forward is one that has seen a considerable amount of headway over the last few years; which is the cross-fertilisation of strategy across numerous faith-based organisations, non-profits and ethical investment enterprises. We need to be aware of each other's efforts and move towards effective dissemination of mission-driven initiatives that work to one another's strengths. These efforts have the greatest impact when done in parallel, and organisations such as this Central Finance Board and its history with the Church Investors Group highlight the power that such co-operation is able to harness. Networks such as these need to be extended, and they need to incorporate a global membership in order to respond to global challenges.

Practically speaking, we should be developing cross-institution committees that explore each other's initiatives on a regular basis, reporting back on areas of success as well as difficulty and ensuring that we bring to bear the collective wisdom of our respective networks. By co-ordinating our efforts in such a way, and through our various channels of influence, we can ensure that the issues we wish to focus on remain at the forefront of agendas across all sectors. In this manner we can come together

to overview the larger picture and see areas of mutual concern and possible collaboration, but work as separate bodies with independent workflows in order to promote action over organisational paralysis.

We need to promote an approach that looks more closely at the structures we have in place to instigate change rather than solely focusing on the changes we wish to see. It is important that we take an iterative approach to our efforts. Learn from each other's initiatives, whether successful or not, and develop our modes of action in order to arrive at a sustainable approach. What we mustn't do is fall into the trap of attaching our efforts to each passing campaign that catches our eye without a detailed understanding of how such a campaign would fit into the long-term strategies and structures we have in place. With the recent example of Occupy, there was a rush by various organisations and institutions to attach themselves to the movement and operate under its banner. Although interfacing with such spontaneous movements is important, and should be done so with enthusiasm, without adequate due diligence and strategic planning a great deal of time and resources can be spent on laborious projects that are ultimately ineffective. We must not overlook the passion and energy that sparked this movement and reinvigorated the conversation, and we must always find ways to interface with individuals who are seeking positive change, but we also can't allow ourselves to overly romanticise such movements if doing so means that we allow proven and productive relationships to falter.

We must be emboldened by the call for change, whilst understanding the responsibility that comes from long-term projects with goals that require significant time and effort to embed into modern society. We should strive to build a basis of wide-scale community engagement that incorporates the needs and concerns of local communities whilst situating them within a wider national and global context. In order to do this successfully, we must take a systemic approach and ensure that a comprehensive, all-inclusive programme for social change arises that meets the high standards demanded by the traditions that we take as our inspiration.

Whilst there are many who feel that faith-based institutions should be marginalised in discussions surrounding the models of our new, post-financial crisis society; it is actually at this very moment, when action is required that inspires the foundations of human interaction, empathy and collective effort that our religious institutions have the greatest role to play. It's important that we do not waste this opportunity to promote successful, faith-based campaigns that have been gaining momentum over the last decade and are now starting to see widespread, tangible results. We must deepen our commitment to these efforts whilst continuing to explore more effective means of implementation, and combine this with an improvement in our ability to communicate to and mobilise those who are seeking new narratives of social cohesion. We need to integrate this with our models of wealth creation in a manner that gives precedence to the wellbeing of humanity and takes seriously our obligation of stewardship over the world that we have been graced with. When we start to view things in this way, our actions become less about arguing a case for relevance in a society that feels we are increasingly marginalised; and more about proving that the needed mechanisms and motivations for systemic change are in place and ready to be called upon.