

The church and organisation theory: Peter Rudge and after

Keith Elford

RGMT 7th March 2016

This paper introduces basic questions that arise when organisation theory is applied within the church. It offers a critical account of Peter Rudge's Ministry and Management (1968), the earliest treatment of the theme of church and organisation theory. It indicates some of the new insights and theoretical developments post-Rudge that should now inform thinking on the subject and some of the questions and lines of inquiry that will inform my PhD research.

The question of whether the church is an organisation

A range of feelings and issues are exposed when the language of organisation is applied to the church. For example, in their provocative and entertaining recent book on the state of the Church of England, Brown and Woodhead (2016) discuss and reject the notion that the church can be described as an organisation:

Organizations are means to ends, usually profit and product. They change all the time in order to deliver their results more efficiently. Churches, by contrast are institutions – like families or Crufts – and institutions are more likely to be treated by those who belong to them as ends in themselves (p93).

On the other hand, the Lord Green Steering Group report (2014) recommended training for senior clergy to “improve organisational leadership capability”. The report’s approach to “talent management” was then widely criticised for a perceived theological weakness and over-reliance on the language and techniques of business. Martyn Percy was a notable critic.¹

A few years’ ago, I had a conversation with a bishop about the role of ideas derived from management and organisation studies in the Church of England. His response was sceptical and he remarked that the church is not an organisation, but an organism. At the time, I was somewhat impatient of this remark. I was using the term “organisation” as I thought, neutrally, to signify something like: “a system of consciously coordinated personal activities or forces of two or more persons”.² For me “organisation” was a generic description of a basic concept which could be seen in terms of a number of metaphors of which “organism” was merely one. My view was, and remains, that the church is at least some sort of organisation, and whilst “organism” might be a particularly useful metaphor to apply to it, the two ideas

¹ Percy, M. *Are these the leaders we really want?* (12/12/2014) Church Times
<https://www.churchtimes.co.uk/articles/2014/12-december/comment/opinion/are-these-the-leaders-that-we-really-want>

² Barnard, quoted by Thung (1976, p.16)

were not in conflict. I thought that the bishop was making what I still consider to be a common error (one I detect in Brown and Woodhead's remarks) which is, to assume that the term "organisation" means "business" and that the ideas and practices associated with "organisation" were thus tainted by association with the instrumental and soulless world of commerce and not appropriate for the church.

Today I have rather more sympathy with the bishop's remark. I think he may well have had something else in mind, something that I did not appreciate at the time, and intended to contrast the human and contingent nature of organisations with the conviction that the church is created not by human beings, but by God and owes its continuing life to its profound, "organic" relationship with God. This, I suggest, is the fundamental ecclesiological question. From a sociological point of view the church is an organisation because it shares many features with other organisations. The question is to what extent the church is a special case in its origins and its being and whether, therefore, the term organisation can be justified ecclesologically.

My PhD research explores this issue, the question of whether, and to what extent, the church can properly be seen as an organisation. I am exploring the question in the context of the Church of England's programme of "Renewal and Reform" and my data collection will involve interviews with several actors associated with the project or affected by it. But first, naturally, I have looked at the existing literature exploring the relationship between organisation theory and practice and the church.

On organisational theory

Before I discuss this, however, it may be helpful if I add a little background about organisation theory and practice. This refers firstly to a body of theory concerning, for example, the role, structure, processes and external relationships that characterise organisations. In the second place, it refers to those practices that are believed to promote effective and efficient organisational performance. This would include such various considerations as organisational design, process improvement, team-working and planning. Different theories of organisation will create a focus on different areas of practice. Organisational theory and its associated practice has affected organisations of all kinds: major corporations, small businesses, state bureaucracies, charities – and, perhaps, the churches and other religious bodies.

Organisational theory is characterised less by a clear line of development, with one widely accepted theoretical position giving way to another, and more by broad schools of thought and associated practice. Morgan (1986) speaks of these schools of thought in terms of the dominant metaphors employed, for example, the machine and the organism. Morgan's approach runs counter to any notion that one school might be simply 'right' and another 'wrong'.

Early "classical" writers such as Weber (1924) and Taylor (1916) focused on the necessity and value of bringing a rational, scientific approach to the management of large and complex organisations. Though long criticised for treating a human endeavour as an impersonal machine-like system, these ideas are described as "classical" because they constitute the first modern theory of organisation and remain influential in practice. Most organisations retain a concern for efficient, rational process and structure. The genesis of the human relations approach to organisation studies is usually traced to the Hawthorne Studies, conducted in the 1920s and 1930s under the leadership of Elton Mayo. The exact significance of these studies is disputed but there is little doubt that they gave rise to a body of theory and practice conceived on the basis that social relationships within organisations are crucial factors in performance

(see Burrell and Morgan 1979 p130-143). Today most organisations at least claim that “people are our greatest asset” and to strive for an environment that brings out the best in them.

A further major perspective in organisational theory is systems thinking which arose, in part, from a desire to address a new focus on the fact that organisations exist in a sometimes problematic and usually changing environment. Systems thinkers see organisations in terms suggested by biological and natural phenomena: important characteristics are ‘emergent’ where the properties of the whole are not found in any of its parts (see, for example, Ackoff, 1981). Here, the open system interacts with, and adapts to the environment in way that maintains dynamic equilibrium and preserves identity (Ackoff, 1981; Beckford, 2015). The focus is on what allows the whole system to flourish and to be sustained in a world of change.

Rudge’s *Management and ministry*

The literature examining the application of organisation theory to the church is not an extensive body of work. Whilst there are many books dealing with organisational themes and practices in the context of the church, particularly those associated with leadership, there are few known to me that apply organisational theory to the church in a comprehensive and substantial fashion. I would like to emphasise this point: the church has engaged explicitly with the world of organisation and management principally through consideration of subjects like leadership and team-working but has not much engaged with the ideas and theories about organisation more broadly or deeply.

I want to devote a substantial part of this paper to a description and discussion of the earliest of these, Peter Rudge’s *Ministry and Management*, published in 1968.³ I do so, partly because his is the only one written in and for a British context and partly, as the first writer to tackle this issue, I see him as a pioneer deserving of more recognition than he gets.

Rudge (1968) set himself to contribute to the founding of a new discipline in the church, the study and practice of what he called “ecclesiastical administration”. He tells us that he had studied management prior to ordination and, once in a parish, found “the earlier administrative training was at least equal in value to the theological training” (xiv). He offers the term “managerial theology” as an alternative title for his new discipline, recognising that for some “administration” has a rather limited scope. This is probably truer now than then. The book is a guide to the principal ideas of organisational theory: he identifies five distinct approaches. These are: the traditional, the charismatic, the classical, human relations and the systemic. He describes each of these in turn, assesses their strengths and weaknesses and illustrates how they both are and could be applied in the Church of England. He devotes a substantial section to the question of which of the schools of organisational theory is most compatible

³ Others include Patrick Granfield’s *Ecclesial Cybernetics*, 1973; Mady Thung’s *The Precarious Organisation*, 1976; and J.F. McCann’s *Church and Organisation. A sociological and theological enquiry*, 1993. Although the books share common themes, concerns (and conclusions), they are each produced for different reasons in different social and ecclesial contexts, and, for the most part, unaware of the others. Rudge (1968) and McCann (1993) propose a new discipline which might be termed ‘management theology’ as the subject of proper study for the church. Granfield (1973) sets out the basis for a programme of reform for the Roman Catholic Church. Thung (1976) describes the structure and activities of a novel kind of “missionary church”. Although I have described Rudge as the first writer on church and organisation theory, there are important precursors, notably Bonhoeffer’s *Sanctorum Communio* (1930) which brings the church into dialogue with sociology.

with the Christian understanding of the church and concludes that the systemic approach best reflects the core images of the church found in the New Testament, particularly that of “the Body of Christ”. Throughout Rudge favours systemic thinking about organisations but does not discard the others. There are several trenchant observations on the way, but no great conclusion. Rudge’s purpose is to provide a useful resource for clergy who are as much managers and leaders as priests and pastors.

Rudge deals first with the organisational theory and his account is a useful and still relevant introduction to some of the discipline’s main ideas. He suggests that there are “five ways in which an organization may be operated; alternatively, there are five theories of management in terms of which organizational behaviour may be described and understood”. To the three approaches I’ve already described he adds two others, the Traditional and Charismatic, derived from Max Weber’s (1924) work on types of legitimate authority. The traditional type Rudge characterises, in Weber’s phrase, as based on “the sanctity of immemorial traditions”. It grows and thrives in stable societies with shared norms where certain classes of people and certain institutions are vested with a widely-accepted authority. In this model the “leader has his place among the elite of elders, the wise and the sacred...he is the fount of wisdom; he expounds what the tradition is...Decision-making...is non-reflective: there is no need to reflect because there is no alternative to doing what has been done before” (Rudge 1968, p24). The charismatic model is essentially intuitive. “The leader announces, usually by the spoken word, the content of the intuition to all; and those who recognize, again by intuition, that his words have a compelling and magnetic quality become his followers and join with him in fulfilling the content of the message” (p.25).

Rudge devotes a chapter to assessing the theories from a theological point of view. His method is to “consider some obvious points of correlation between organizational theory and statements of doctrine” (37). He starts by looking for a fit between the values and principles of his five organisational models and the Church’s understanding of itself. His method for doing so is to look at his organisational models in the light of biblical statements about the Church. He takes Paul Minear as his guide, and examines the principal New Testament images of the Church alongside his five theories.⁴ He finds correlates for each of the theories except for the classical: he asserts that “there is nothing to give validity to such points as rationalization, the mechanistic structure and relationships, the discrete parts joined in a mechanical way” (39). He strongly prefers the systemic theory, concluding: “The conceptions of the organization in the traditional and charismatic theories have theological analogues, but they also have inherent limitations. Neither is capable of expressing fully the central biblical doctrine of the church – only the systemic theory can do this” (46). This statement is largely built on the belief that the central ecclesiological idea in the New Testament is that of the church as the body of Christ. Rudge goes on to consider the organizational theories in the light of Niehbuhr’s ideas about the relation of the church to society⁵ and concludes, approvingly, that the systemic theory accords best with the idea of “Christ as the transformer of society” which, according to Rudge, “Niehbuhr recognised as being the great central position of the Christian faith” (50). There are further sections on the doctrines of the ministry, of God and of man, from which Rudge draws similar conclusions about the superiority of the

⁴ Minear, P.S. (1960) *Images of the Church in the New Testament*, Philadelphia, The Westminster Press; London, The Lutterworth Press

⁵ Niehbuhr, H.R.(1951) *Christ and Culture*, New York, Harper

systemic theory. In my view this section suffers from weaknesses in the exegetical approach and from what seems a failure to engage in depth with systematic theology and ecclesiology.

Rudge offers insights derived from organisational theory that illuminate and interpret features of church life in a way that I find helpful. This is, perhaps, where he is at his strongest. One of the ways the book is most important is in how it reveals some of the ways the Church of England was (consciously or unconsciously) influenced in the 20th century by organisational theory in such developments as the creation of the synodical structure (a parliamentary type representative body operating at local, regional and national levels) and a number of national bodies providing an administrative and support function analogous to the UK government civil service. Rudge (1968) saw the principal organisational influence in these developments as classical theory, and viewed these structures as overlaid on a parish system more characterised by a traditional model of leadership. Rudge (1968) further saw these developments as creating difficulties of communication and leadership for the church and noted that Weberian models are often not recognised as organisational models, but described and defended theologically (p. 113). A question here would be whether the church is well-served by these models and whether the tendency to theologise them creates confusion and inhibits the church's capacity for reform.

As Rudge describes the five organisational models he makes some acute observations about the Church of England, suggesting that it is a commitment to (often unrecognised) models of organisation that underpins other features of its life. For example, he speaks of the difficulties of maintaining the traditional model in a changing world: the clergyman "is expected to perform all the ancient rituals that hallow the life of the organization; but outworn customs and outdated ceremonies can be very wearisome. Yet he dare not withdraw from such activities" (123). He notes how the old model is difficult to maintain in a world where clergy are no longer supported by servants (124). Although the last remark might seem to itself belong to a long-departed world, these observations in substance seem still relevant and apt in contemporary discussion about renewal in the Church of England and in the church more generally. We may wonder to what extent we continue to maintain or reject practices on the basis of organisational rather than theological commitments; in for example, our continued reliance upon committees and other bureaucratic structures.

Nevertheless, I want to suggest that Rudge's work leaves some important questions inadequately treated. In addition, the book was published nearly 50 years' ago, and much has happened in the interim: there are new considerations that require attention.

Issues and considerations

I will focus on three issues that arise and need further consideration.

The first concerns theology and, especially, ecclesiology. Rudge's theological treatment of organisational theory is the weakest part of the book. Firstly, he looks for the best fit between organisational theories and Christian doctrine but does not address the fundamental question of whether the church should be seen as an organisation in the first place. Secondly, his approach to ecclesiology is to rely wholly on biblical metaphors about which he assumes a hierarchy with little clear justification. This seems an inadequate procedure. There is no attempt to bring to bear a more integrated view of the church.

Since Rudge wrote there have been theological voices rejecting social science based theories because of their perceived dependence on secular ideology, notably that of John Milbank (2006). On the other hand, ecclesiologists have moved from the attempt to systematise a theology of church to a focus on the church as it is lived and experienced. For example, Healy (2000) rejects the notion of what he calls “blueprint ecclesiologies” and advances the notion of the “concrete church”. This argues that the church, whatever it may be in its essence, is only actually encountered in particular forms in particular contexts and that, in fact, the church is shaped by the conditions in which it finds itself as well as by received religious tradition. This view opens the possibility that understanding context and organisational form may also be seen as an acceptable concern of theology and that organisational theory might have a part to play.

The second of my three issues concerns developments in organisation theory. A major feature of the discipline, post 1980 or so, has been the questioning of the assumptions which informed the theories described by Rudge. Morgan and Burrell (1979) in their influential consideration of this theme, suggest that organisation theory to that point had largely taken place within a paradigm that they describe as “functionalist”. This they describe as “characterised by a concern for providing explanations of *the status quo*, *social order*, *consensus*, *social integration*, *solidarity*, *need satisfaction* and *actuality*. It approaches these general sociological concerns from a standpoint which tends to be *realist*, *positivist*, *determinist* and *nomothetic*” (26). Theorists working in this tradition tend to be confident that the organisation is a real entity, about which knowledge can be objectively and comprehensively gathered and analysed using approaches like those used in the natural sciences. Morgan and Burrell signal that other approaches are possible and describe three other paradigms, based on whether they are more orientated towards change or regulation, or more subjective or objective in their epistemology. Epistemological and ontological concerns have brought to organisational theory, as to other disciplines, a suspicion of authoritative narratives, of which the theories we have been discussing are held to be examples, seeing them as constituting and reflecting power in thought and action with the effect of furthering the interests of elites (Hatch, 2006). Parallel developments in systems theory have also introduced a note of greater caution. Organisations have been seen as “complex adaptive systems”: this approach shares much with older systems theory – notably the belief that “the world cannot be understood through taking apart the bits and understanding them separately. Factors work together *synergistically*, that is, the whole is different from the sum of its parts. We live as part of patterns of relationships” (Boulton, Allen and Bowman 2015). But to this is added a much greater emphasis on context and emergence. Local factors affect outcomes which are only predictable to a degree. In an organisational context, this creates a far greater caution about ideas like control and planning than was typical of organisational theory in the past. To give an example of how these issues might play out in practice: in the theories described by Rudge the purpose of the organisation would be a given, and/or determined by those in positions of power. Today many theorists and practitioners would consider this a questionable procedure.

My third issue is that the church’s situation has changed dramatically. In the period from just before Rudge published his work to now there has been a dramatic numerical decline in church attendance and participation in rituals such as baptism. Today there is a great deal of concern about this in the Church of England and the “Renewal and Reform” programme is a response. I’m not sure that there has been anything like enough clear thought about what decline is or what it means but it can hardly be ignored. In this much-changed context it is not clear what the church should or can do. The church is an

exceptionally long-lived organisation. It surely has its own resources for managing the situation. But might an understanding and application of organisational theory help? Currently there can appear to be a sharp division between those who seem to want to grab every technique going and those who reject everything which can be dismissed as “managerialism”.

Some initial thoughts

These are some of the questions I hope to address. My preliminary view is that the church *is* an organisation *as well as* the body of Christ. The church is given and created by God but is lived and experienced in a human, social form, that can be viewed, appropriately, sociologically. This means an integrated and discerning integrated approach is required, one which pays proper attention to both organisational theory and ecclesiology. I am approaching the question as an Anglican, and I believe my view is consistent with an Anglican ecclesiology. I would be interested to hear how those from different ecclesiological traditions see the issue.

Meanwhile, here is a very rough outline of some features of my thinking. I start with the view that the kingdom of God is larger than the church and that God is active in creation. I am concerned that there is some danger of creating a dualism between sacred and secular in this debate. I believe the church is a God-given reality and that it has an identity that needs to be guarded. On the other hand, it is, in fact, influenced, even shaped, by contextual factors, as Healy (2000) shows. Rudge (1968) shows how this has been true of the Church of England. The issue is how aware and discerning we are about what is helpful and what is not. The question may be not so much *whether* the church should make use of ideas from apparently secular sources, but *which* and *how*. I do not believe that ideas need to come from within to have value or be of God.

Secondly, I want to explore the idea that theology and sociology; ecclesiology and organisational theory, have their own spheres of competence. (Here I am influenced by the treatment of the relationship between theology and the natural sciences in McGrath 2016.) Reality is multi-faceted and to be fully understood, requires examination from a variety of perspectives. I see organisational theory and ecclesiology as two different ways of viewing reality which have the potential to complement each other. To be sure, we all come to any phenomenon with a “position” but I reject the idea that social science necessarily implies a kind of “social scientism”.

So, my initial thinking is that organisational theory does indeed have something to offer the church. But I have a proviso, which is that the church must approach organisation theory and its associated practices with care and discernment and bring them into a productive dialogue with the church’s own insights, experiences and wisdom. Beckford (2015) suggests that any viable system must actively manage its present activities, act to develop itself and respond to future challenges and do both on the basis of a continual renewal of its essential identity. I expect to find some real synergy here with a church that requires its ministers to declare allegiance to a “faith the Church is called upon to proclaim afresh in each generation”.⁶ My hypothesis is that both organisational theory and theology drive towards a similar conclusion: that the church needs to reimagine itself continually on the basis of a profound understanding of its essential identity in dialogue with a deep understanding what is happening in the

⁶ From the preface to the “declaration of assent” made by Church of England clergy at ordination and on entering new appointments

world. Given where we are today this may be a challenging task, but I think organisational theory might be able to provide insights and processes that would help.

References

- Ackoff, R. L. (1981) *Creating the corporate future*. New York, Wiley
- Beckford, J. (2016) *The Intelligent Organisation: Realising the value of information*. Abingdon and New York, Routledge
- Bonhoeffer, D. (1930) *Sanctorum Communio: A Theological Study of the Sociology of the Church*, ed. Clifford J Green, trans Krauss and Lukens 2009, Minneapolis, Fortress Press
- Boulton, J.G., Allen, P.M., and Bowman, C., (2015) *Embracing Complexity: strategic perspectives for an age of turbulence*, Oxford, Oxford University Press
- Brown, A. & Woodhead, L. (2016) *That was the Church that was: How the Church of England lost the English people*. London, Bloomsbury.
- Burrell, G. & Morgan, G. (1979) *Sociological paradigms and organisational analysis*. London, Heinemann.
- Granfield, P. (1973) *Ecclesial Cybernetics. A study of democracy in the Church*. New York, Macmillan.
- Hatch, M. J., with Cunliffe, A.L. (2006) *Organization Theory: Modern, symbolic and post-modern perspectives*. Oxford, Oxford University Press.
- Healy, N. M. (2000) *Church, World and the Christian Life: Practical-prophetic ecclesiology*. Cambridge, Cambridge University Press.
- McCann, J. F. (1993) *Church and Organisation. A sociological and theological enquiry*. London & Toronto, Associated University Press.
- McGrath, A. (2016) *Enriching our Vision of Reality: theology and the natural sciences in dialogue*, London, SPCK
- Milbank, J. (2006) *Theology and Social Theory: beyond secular reason 2nd ed.* Oxford, Blackwell
- Morgan, G. (1986) *Images of organisation*. London, Sage.
- Report of the Lord Green Steering Group (2014) *Talent management for future leaders and leadership development for bishops and deans: A new approach*. Church of England.
- Rudge, P. F. (1968) *Ministry and Management: The study of ecclesiastical administration*. London, Tavistock.
- Taylor, F. (1911) *The Principles of Scientific Management*, Norwood, The Plimpton Press,
- Thung, M. A. (1976) *The Precarious Organisation: Sociological explorations of the Church's mission and structure*. The Hague, Mouton.
- Weber, M. (1924) Legitimate Authority and Bureaucracy, in *Organisation Theory, Selected Readings*, (D. S. Pugh, Ed.) 3rd Edition, 1990, London, Penguin