

What is Business For?

Reconsidering the Purpose of Business - Part Three

WOKE CAPITALISM 1

In the previous two articles in this series, Peter Heslam has provided research-based arguments that companies need to shape their strategies and operations around their purpose, model integrity and authenticity, and be clear about their purpose. He has also suggested that, while most thought leaders in the field of purpose reflect Christian values, ultimate purpose requires a theological starting point. In this third part of the series, he begins a two-part exploration of 'woke capitalism', the first part of which seeks to address this phenomenon from the perspective of the Trinity.

The inventor of the term 'capitalism' is often thought to be Adam Smith, rather like 'Methodism' is thought to have originated with John and Charles Wesley. Neither are true. It is to the early critics of those movements that we owe those terms. Ever since Karl Marx popularised the term capitalism in his book *Das Kapital* (1867), prefixes have been added. They include 'industrial', 'financial', 'turbo', 'social', 'platform', 'digital', 'compassionate' and 'green'.

One of the most recent prefixes is 'woke'. But what does it mean? Until recently, 'woke' was generally just about waking up – as in the Beatles' famous lyric: 'Woke up, fell out of bed; dragged a comb across my head'. But with the rise of the Black Lives Matter movement, the term has come to mean alertness to injustice and prejudice. It even finds a place in the Oxford English Dictionary, as does a term with which it is often associated, 'post-truth'.

In the business world, 'woke capitalism' finds partial expression in the development that has been the focus of this series – the conscious shift many companies are making, or are seeking to make, towards making purpose a chief arbiter of strategy. Taking a longer-term view of their financial viability, such companies typically seek to integrate

social, environmental, and relational concerns within their decision-making processes.

This movement is not new – previous manifestations included the terms 'ethical business' and 'corporate social responsibility'. But today it is propelled by a resurgent interest in how personal purpose can be aligned with corporate purpose. Research noted previously in this series shows that, especially amongst younger people, companies achieve the best recruitment, retainment, and work satisfaction levels when workers feel that the values that are important to them as individuals are reflected in the corporate culture of the company.

As with any vigorous contemporary movement, especially when commercial interests are involved, the movement has critics and advocates. Whichever side one might feel most drawn to, becoming alert to injustice and prejudice, and being willing to challenge it, lies at the heart of the prophetic tradition in the Bible. This tradition is most closely associated with the Hebrew prophets but it runs throughout scripture and it culminates in the ministry of Jesus, before being propelled through the rest of the New Testament through the outpouring of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost.

A striking characteristic of the way the Bible teaches about becoming alert to, and seeking to tackle, injustice is the link it makes with spiritual awakening. The importance of such awakening can be found throughout scripture¹ and is a particularly recurrent theme in the Psalms. Even though David had the power to kill his enemy King Saul he knew it would have been unjust to do so. So instead we find him penning these rousing lyrics whilst hiding from his enemy in a cave: 'Awake, my soul! Awake harp and lyre! I will awaken the dawn!' (Ps 57:8). By being spiritually awake he avoided an act of injustice.

Against this biblical background, it is not surprising that historical outpourings of the Holy Spirit – such as the one correctly associated with the Wesley brothers – are often called 'awakenings'. The fact that such revivals are generally associated with social movements that challenge injustice and prejudice only highlights the biblical principle that becoming 'woke' to God inevitably results in becoming woke to the needs of others.

The doctrine of the Trinity helps shed light on the inevitability of this connection. However, explaining the Trinity without slipping into heresy is tricky. Commonly used metaphors have



Trinity like a circular dance

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significant problems. One is that they generally have components that can be separated: the three-leaf clover; water (liquid, solid, gas); and egg (shell, white, yolk). Egg is a good case in point. In Anglican circles, seasoned vicars who despair at their attempts to explain the Trinity often delegate the sermon on Trinity Sunday to their newly-trained curates. The result is generally the proverbial 'curate's egg' – good in parts.

Another problem with such metaphors is that they are static. This is theologically deficient because God is known through action as well as being. But it is also *practically* deficient for people seeking to live their faith in their daily activity. Theologians trying to help such people have suggested that the Father, Son and Holy Spirit correspond to the work of planning, implementing and evaluating; and to exercising integrity, servanthood and excellence; and to creating, redeeming and transforming.

These suggestions are also good in parts but they fail to do justice to the

ministry occurring within the Godhead. Each person in that communion actively and lovingly shares in the being and action of the others – they cooperate, inter-penetrate, interdepend and co-inhere. Some early theologians came up with a great word for this: *perichoresis*. Derived from two Greek words, it means 'dancing around'. The inner life of God is a circular dance of love that is so spontaneous, free and inclusive that it spills out in the creation, redemption and transformation of the world.

Static views of the Trinity miss this centripetal yet centrifugal dynamic and can petrify humans and their relationships. Work patterns can thereby become unnecessarily inflexible, controlling and hierarchical. It is no coincidence that, in seeking to shun such culture, Silicon Valley has led the world in technological innovation.

The spontaneity, freedom and inclusivity that spill out on the Day of Pentecost provide a glimpse into the triune life of God. They also model what

happens to communities when they are so caught up into that divine dance of love that they 'participate in the divine nature'². When we are awakened to a God who consists in relationship, we cannot but be awakened to our need for a right relationship with the world around us, including with the natural environment and with those suffering social injustice and prejudice.

Could this offer a visionary purpose for business in the age of woke? Some hazards with this will be covered in the second of these two articles on woke capitalism. But just imagine our workplaces modelling the love of the Trinity! Some organisations are already seeking to do this, helped by the research findings and audit tools produced by the Relationships Foundation and WeAreCompany³. Clever theologians may have convinced weary vicars and wary churchgoers that the Trinity is difficult to get right. But love is always right and cannot be heretical. It does not even need words. Yet it is a language everyone understands. **REO**

1. E.g. Isa 51.9,17; 52.1; 60.1; Mal 4.2; Mt 25.1-13; Lk 21.34-36; Eph 5.14; Rom 13.11; 1 Thess 5.6; Rev 3.2

2. 2 Peter 1.4. See my God on Monday reflections on Pentecost ('Embracing Diversity') and on the Trinity ('Daily Dance') here: <https://www.faith-in-business.org/Groups/352043/Blogs.aspx>.

3. Some of these findings and tools were presented by WeAreCompany in a Faith in Business Monthly webinar on 3rd June 2021 entitled 'Impact of the Pandemic on Working Relationships'. A recording is available in the 'Videos' section of the Faith in Business website (www.faithinbusiness.org).



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