

## Embracing Chaos: the Formless Void as Organizational Template Tim Harle

### ABSTRACT

In the beginning, we learn, 'the earth was a formless void and darkness covered the face of the deep' (Genesis 1.2). Traditional views of this Judaeo-Christian creation story conceive of a deity harnessing chaos to create order. They reflect a loathing of chaos, a Newtonian worldview of cause and effect, and a desire for control. We find echoes in today's organizations, which prefer the order of a prairie to the chaos of a rainforest (Harle, 2007).

This paper uses a different starting point. Viewed from a complexity perspective, the emergence of order from chaos is something we recognize. 'The major problem confronting us is not the chaos itself but our attitudes toward it. By and large, we deny its very existence, because we are scared of its impact' (O'Murchu, 2004; see also Keller, 2003).

This paper encourages the embracing of chaos. It examines three areas where congruity between complexity and Christianity offers creative possibilities to understand organizations.

- **Change.** 'Managing change' is a great oxymoron of our time. In a masterpiece of understatement, Wheatley & Kellner-Rogers (1996) highlight an observation of two pioneering biologists. 'Maturana and Varela note something quite important for our activities with one another. We can never direct a living system. We can only disturb it.' In my experience of working with business leaders, this observation is itself profoundly disturbing. Yet discomfort is healthy. 'Relentless discomfort is a discipline that arrests the drift of living systems towards self-confirmation and homeostasis' (Pascale et al, 2000). Concepts of renewal (conversion, metanoia) are at the heart of the Christian faith, for example in the Benedictine vow of *conversatio morum*: 'The call to conversion of life is in effect a vow to change, to never remain still either in self-satisfied fulfilment or self-denying despair' (Dollard et al, 2002). Rendle (1998) has applied a complexity approach to change in an ecclesial context.
- **Leadership.** Leaders have a responsibility to help others embrace uncertainty and chaos. Through building a network of relationships, they can promote security and encourage exploration (cf stability in the Benedictine tradition). And a leadership model is at hand - far from a static and rigid hierarchy, the dance of the Holy Trinity suggests dynamism and movement. Echoes of complexity language are plain: 'In a trinitarian ecclesiology, order is not provided or imposed by a single group, permanently over against another, but by the fluctuating movement in relationship of the personal participants... In a perichoretic [mutual relationship] community of love, a self-ordering process takes place in which, although individual persons will fulfil unique and necessary roles, the total ordering is achieved without any one being in a permanently subordinate position to another' (Greenwood, 1994).
- **Boundaries.** Pivotal encounters in the gospels occurred at margins of society: Jesus' earthly life is recorded as stretching from an obscure stable to the edge of a city. In between, surprising meetings occur and relationships develop. Yet our organizations' desire for order and control tend to reinforce, rather than break down, barriers. Contrast a complexity worldview. 'The very idea of boundaries changes profoundly. Rather than being a self-protective wall, boundaries become the place of meeting and exchange. We usually think of these edges as the means to define separateness... But in living systems, boundaries are something quite different. They are the place where new relationships take form, an important place of exchange and growth.' (Wheatley, 2005)

In conclusion, the formless void is offered as a template to challenge organizations to embrace chaos, encourage emergence, and promote self-organization.

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