

Tom Houston, *My Story with Governance. What I Have Learned from Running Christian Organizations* (Oxford: Regnum Books, 2014)

— *Hold fast (only) what is good. Discuss it among yourselves. Search the Scriptures* (48)

I have been teaching and researching issues concerning “good governance” (1) for a number of years in connection with the Master’s programme in Polar Law of the University of Akureyri, Iceland. Moreover, since my youth, I have been involved with a Christian charity operating in Genoa, Italy. It is the first time that I come across a book that tries to combine together an articulate Scripture-based, faith-imbued understanding of good governance aimed at persons working within organisations of all stripes (esp. parts 3 and 4 of 4: 43-101), and a deeply personal Christian meditation (esp. parts 1 and 2 of 4: 1-40).

Good governance within organisations and Christianity share much more ground than it is commonly realised, particularly in the largely secular Nordic countries. Historically, Christian churches have been some of the longest-lived organisations in the world’s societies and, as such, they have been capable of good as well as of bad governance, not to mention of recurrent reflection thereupon.

Also, it would be difficult to fully grasp the West’s and its former colonies’ preoccupation with good governance within private businesses and public administrations without any reference to the legacy of Christian values, concepts, experiences and institutions: solidarity, philanthropy and humanitarianism; cooperative movements; campaigns for corporate social and environmental responsibility; ethical business practices (especially in banking and finance); debt relief; the social doctrine of the Church of Rome; the Christian democratic parties of influential countries such as Germany and Spain; and the many faith-based NGOs operating worldwide (e.g. Houston’s own British and Foreign Bible Society, World Vision of Europe, World Vision International, The Lausanne Committee for World Evangelization).

Conceptually, both good governance and Christianity *qua* way of life orbit around fundamental axiological criteria. Without such criteria it would be impossible to judge whether companies and individuals active therein, whether public or private, do any good, contribute credibly to the common good, or fail miserably and culpably. It is upon the basis of such axiological criteria, often only tacitly endorsed and hardly ever reasoned out explicitly, that we can begin to explain why standard dimensions of good governance such as Hans-Otto Hirschman’s “voice” or the IMF’s “transparency” are actually any good to anyone or any group (3).

For one, then, Houston’s book is a reminder of the often-forgotten shared ground of good governance and Christianity.

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Another element that lacks within the near totality of the academic literature on good governance is a serious consideration of the motivations of the breathing, feeling and thinking persons that work within private businesses or serve within public administrations. Psychological insight is typically absent in the existing literature, and so is a keen eye for the felt side of being in general. Confined to impersonal, if not de-personalising, socio-political, economic and institutional perspectives, actual persons' motivational issues are either ignored or reduced to the inane fiction of economic rationality. Tom Houston acknowledges *homo economicus*' self-interest as an insight of Adam Smith's (27), but does not remain limited to or by it. Against the simplistic mantra of de-regulated private business and tough market competition, he writes: "no sound governance can happen so long as rivalry is unbridled and untreated" (29). Smith himself, *qua* author of the *Theory of Moral Sentiments*, would agree with Houston on this point. Rather, actual persons' motivational issues appear regularly in management and business studies about leadership. This is a notion that is not included in the title of Houston's book, but that nevertheless pervades it (e.g. his discussion of the "servant" as the Christian role-model for leadership, not "the sovereign", who pretends to be competent on all organisational aspects and attempts to direct them all; 40) and concludes it (cf. Appendix 1, 103-4).

Thus, for another, Houston's book fills a gap in current good-governance studies and bridges the gap between these studies and those in management and business that have leadership as their topic.

The most original aspect of Houston's endeavour, however, is his ability to derive from his own experiences in the Baptist Church and a number of religious organisations, as well as from the Biblical texts themselves, a plethora of case studies about transparency, growth, re-branding, personnel selection and evaluation, public-private partnerships, accountability, peace, security, social responsibility, corruption and effective leadership—i.e. issues that are central or anyhow relevant to good-governance studies. The religious standpoint of the book, combined with the author's possibly unaware Polanyi-esque epistemology, is such that it brings to the forefront the importance of personal motivation within organisations for the sake of good governance. The relevance of such a topic should be obvious, even if it is rarely so, especially if we ponder upon the frequently acknowledged cause of the 2008 financial crisis, the offshoots of which are still causing much devastation across societies worldwide: *greed*.

Greed is a vice. Vices are persons' faults. Institutions may certainly facilitate certain vices (or lead to their marginalisation). Slave ownership facilitated cruelty, for instance (and its comprehensive abolition worked in the opposite direction). Competitive careerism in de-regulated finance selects for and facilitates greed (whilst J.M. Keynes' "euthanasia of the

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rentier” would obtain the opposite effect; *General Theory of Employment, Interest and Money*, 1936: 24.II). Nonetheless, the final call resides in each person’s free conscience and free agency. Even slave owners could exercise restraint or emancipate their slaves; whilst the alleged “best and brightest” enrolled in our universities may well decide not to pursue Gordon Gekko’s career path and glamorous lifestyle. Houston’s reference to the “ENRON” scandal in the opening pages of the book is therefore most *à propos* (1).

Where vices are rampant, virtues are sorely needed. In Medieval Christendom, the painter Ambrogio Lorenzetti (1290-1348) knew this matter well and offered his own personal Christian meditation on the virtues needed for good governance, or *buon governo*, by way of magnificent frescoes in the Public Palace of Siena, Italy. Without such virtues of each man and woman, as he depicted around 1339, bad government would ensue, despite the same initial institutional set-up. On his part, Houston’s book is replete with references to personal virtues and virtuous paths of personal action, without which organisations are unlikely to become beacons of good governance: “honesty, harmony and openness” (49); “helping” people rather than “burdening them” and keeping them ignorant (76); refraining from hoarding wealth, defrauding others, telling lies, denying what is due to others, discriminating against “the disabled”, condoning injustice, “slander[ing]” another’s good name, fostering hatred, pursuing vendettas (80); sobriety and “integrity” (84). The unusual virtue of “anonymity” (19ff) is retrieved in St. John’s gospel as instrumental towards personal humility and honesty, so as to disconnect oneself from strong family ties, which far too easily lead to corruption and the denial of genuine meritocracy. Self-observation, self-knowledge and self-reflection, all of which have been practiced and taught in the Christian tradition, are recommended in order to identify the cultural presuppositions that may limit our ability to act in a novel and more constructive way. Where absent, virtue can be made present: “We can be born again” (39).

Houston’s book is an uncompromisingly Christian book. As such, it can elicit or reinforce the pious motivations of the believer, especially when it states: “What you believe about God determines your idea of justice and how you judge people” (88); or “total love for the LORD” is the pivotal element in letting people become means of good governance, thus abandoning hypocritical and superficial “Play-Acting Religion” (72). Non-believers may find some wisdom in it too, however, especially when the author identifies further key-elements, e.g. “Economic Open-Handedness” rather than “Selfishness”; and “Care for All” in *lieu* of “Intolerant Ethnicity” (72). Additionally, any reader may benefit from reflecting upon the author’s analysis of Judea in Jesus’ times as a “failed state”, i.e. a token of problematic phenomena that are familiar to today’s development organisations and expert members thereof (67ff). Even the Old Testament’s plagues of “famine”, “disease”, “the sword of war”

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and “exile” should not sound too archaic or remote to their ears, since their eyes have witnessed *inter alia* the tragedies of Somalia, Sierra Leone, Rwanda and Congo (69).

Furthermore, all of the book’s readers can be enriched by reflecting upon the importance of personal moral behaviour, starting with one’s own. Were it even true that the providential “invisible hand” postulated briefly by Adam Smith in his 1776 *Wealth of Nations* (IV.2.9) makes the world of business go round and, *pace* social and environmental externalities, be generally beneficial, it would be still the case that self-interest can all too easily turn into destructive greed without the cultivation of the proper dispositions of the heart discussed by Adam Smith in his prior *Theory of Moral Sentiments* (1759). Devoid of sympathy, kindness, generosity, self-restraint, sense of duty, honour and integrity, the textbooks’ self-interested *homo economicus* comes nothing short of a sociopathic monstrosity, upon which no functional family nucleus, no functioning society, no firm legal system and, *a fortiori*, no fungible economy could ever be erected. As also argued by a towering member of the Social Doctrine of the Church, Arthur Fridolin Utz, in his 1994 book *Wirtschaftsethik*, part from self-interest alone, a thick stratum of ordinary decency, non-calculating humaneness and widespread moral integrity are necessary for parents to take proper care of their children, for citizens to trust one another, for judges and policemen to do their job, for sellers and buyers to trust one another, and for entrepreneurs not to face the drug lords’ fate of being constantly distracted by the fear of being kidnapped and murdered by their relatives, their neighbours, the nominal guardians of law and order, or their peers and employees. It goes without saying that this stratum must be even thicker if we wish to have “good governance” the way the World Bank’s experts epitomise it, i.e. “predictable, open and enlightened policymaking... a bureaucracy imbued with a professional ethos, an executive arm of government accountable for its actions, and a strong civil society participating in public affairs; and all behaving under the rule of law.” (World Bank, *Governance, The World Bank’s Experience*, 1994: vii).

Finally, Houston’s book may be of interest to secular readers who wish to find ways to communicate effectively with religiously minded persons, Christian ones in particular. Given the importance of religious groups in many countries’ political life, and especially in Sub-Saharan and Latin American aid-recipient countries, it would seem intellectually, strategically and rhetorically apt to be able to approach good-governance issues also from a religiously informed perspective and with a lexicon that embraces Scriptural references and theological concepts. This would be particularly useful to people working within donor agencies in countries like Norway or Iceland, where the knowledge of Christian history and theology is no longer as common as it was when these communities obtained their national independence and established national Lutheran Churches.

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