

Theories and Spectrums: What Pressures Do Parachurch Agencies Face Toward Losing Their Founding Missions?

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Abstract

This article investigates seven parachurch agencies that have a holistic approach to Christian mission, specifically in order to examine how certain theories and spectrums might explain mission drift. Organizational fields theory can help identify issues relating to institutional fields while focusing on how parachurch NGOs/NPOs are moulded by institutional rules. Parachurch organizations in the field of socio-humanitarianism are coerced into achieving the agenda of secular institutions and governments rather than that of the Church. These pressures and challenges constrain Christian agencies to drift away from their original holistic mission-objectives.

Key Words: holistic, mission drift, parachurch agencies, spectrums, theories

Introduction

This article examines the results that emerged from my empirical research in connection with existing theories and spectrums related to circumstantial factors propitious to the development of mission drift in parachurch agencies. The opening rationale of this research is based on the analysis of the interconnected theories and spectrums. I compare my findings with the results of previous hypothetical studies and publications. This entire process is related to the main question of the article: *In what ways do intitutional theories and spectral challenges constrain parachurch agencies to face the crisis of mission drift in their mission activities?*

To answer this question, this study methodically uses a mix of bibliographic research approaches associated with interpretative and multiple case qualitative techniques in order to generate pertinent data contributing to knowledge. The research for this case study is drawn from a large population of seven Christian NGOs/NPOs. To collect empirical data, I referred to the respondents as Interviewee 1, Interviewee 2, etc., for the sake of anonymity. The verbatim quotes are put in *italics*, so that the research participants' *voices stand out*.

Circumstantial factors

Theory analysis predicts the events that affect the phenomenon of mission drift and the possible ways it can touch other phenomena. In this study, the theory is broken down into different parts that are then examined individually and as they relate to each other in terms of events affecting mission drift. Unlike theories, spectrums can be used in analysing the concept of mission drift in a parachurch organization as a circumstance. The term spectrum is mainly used in science, especially in optical physics, to study the reflecting rays of rainbow light and colour going through a prism by refraction or diffraction (Newton 1671/72, 3076). Such reflection is a process that has the potential to vary infinitely across a continuum. This spectrum underlies possible mechanisms that can change smoothly, generating similar disorders—in this case mission drift. Throughout the article, various theories and continua are elucidated, thus forming the philosophical part of this study's research.

Organization Theory

In this section, challenges that constrain the distinctiveness that a faith-based NGO/NPO can experience are further explored, such as those suggested by organization theory or institutional

theory. In this research analysis, organization theory is used to reveal external forces that challenge or put pressure on Christian holistic agencies. Lin (2019, 71), using her efficient categorization, argues that one of the known ways that these external pressures challenge Christian NGOs is through the environment of key regulatory agencies, resources, suppliers, stakeholders, and other institutions that produce similar services.

Church-related agencies sometimes develop relationships with organizations that are dissimilar to them and that might have a different understanding of Christian faith and of the meaning of holistic mission, and which therefore have a divergent impact upon the religious agency. On the one hand, parachurch agencies “have relations to their founding faith traditions. These can include church congregations, affiliates, organizations and individuals” (Lin 2019, 71). As Schneider argues, these Christian communities have a tremendous impact on the support structures of the agency as well as on the extent to which these Christian faith-based NGOs/NPOs reflect their mission objectives and values (2006, 517-518). On the other hand, these parachurch NGOs/NPOs “exist within society, and might consciously seek validation as legitimate members within their area of expertise” (Schneider 2006, 18). This form of challenge is what one respondent reported, then went on to say that many church-related organizations have drifted from their first mission, partnering with institutions and governments all over the world for the sake of legitimization and validation (Interviewee 5, 25 April 2020). There is a need for “these faith-based organizations to connect to higher levels of decision-making as well as to share information with other established organizations,” asserts Lin (2019, 71).

In addressing issues related to organizational field theory, Gallet (2016, 98) argues that institutional rules may be reinforced through public expectations arising as a result of legal requirements. These rules should be broadly disseminated to the point of becoming key patterns for various NGOs/NPOs operating within the same institutional/organizational field. Berger unambiguously states that the fact of “being too explicitly religious can result in the creation of legal obstacles when applying for public funding” (2003, 17). Interviewee 16 echoes these legal threats or opposition to funding in stating the following: *Our partners were very much against the term evangelize... If donors would hear that we want to convert people to Christ then they will stop supporting financially* (23 May 2020). Therefore, the success of these agencies is dependent on conforming to rules that are shaped by leading actors in the field, such as the dominant organisations, the governments involved, and/or the various professional associations operating in the same institutional environment. This perception has been put forward by Berger as one of the fundamental reasons why many Christian faith-based agencies try to seek formal recognition as ‘NGOs/NPOs’ (2003, 17, 20) in order to fit into the environment of international organizations.

There are potential major divergences relating to goals that can result in compromising the parachurch agency’s mission in terms of what Ormerod calls a “free market competition model” (2000, 435). Cleary, commenting on these organizational issues, states that church-related agencies have been “seduced into the rhetoric of the market, they are seduced into the agenda of elite actors,” and asks: “In whose image are we providing services? Are we providing services in the image of the gospel, and what we believe to be our mandate” (1999, 4)? Are parachurch NGOs/NPOs now simply the handmaidens of elite actors in the organizational field, providing the kinds of mission that ‘they’ believe is appropriate for people (Cleary 1999, 4)? In an attempt to answer this question, Interviewee 16 declares that *Jesus should be the centre of the church-related NGOs/NPOs’ relief and development works in order to stand apart from the philanthropist clubs, the humanitarian organizations and UN agencies which operate on a secular and humanitarian basis* (8 May 2020). For parachurch holistic agencies, compromising the mission entrusted by God to the NGO/NPO is an environmental challenge or organizational field issue that may seriously constrain features that are distinctively Christian and lead to

mission drift. As a consequence, the impact of these working relationships with international organizations, challenges and puts pressures on the agencies that can lead to institutional isomorphism.

Isomorphic Theory

The theory of organizational isomorphism was first elaborated in an article entitled, “The Iron Cage Revisited: Institutional Isomorphism and Collective Rationality in Organizational Fields,” by DiMaggio and Powell (1983, 147-160). These writers describe institutional isomorphism as the process by which church-related agencies lose their Christian distinctiveness and identity, and come to the point of resembling one another (1983, 147). This conformism happens because of isomorphic pressures that constrain Christian NGOs/NPOs to homogenize their purposes and to become more like other organizations that operate in the same field. A good example of an institution to which isomorphic theory can be applied is Harvard University. Greer and Horst (2014, 17-18) write that the university was established in New England as a Christian educational institution, but one that has slowly lost its Christian identity and basis. They (2014, 18) note that the motto of Harvard University at the start was, ‘Veritas Christo et Ecclesiae’ (Truth for Christ and the Church), that it employed professors who were exclusively Christian, and that it rooted all its policies and practices in a Christian worldview.

However, today—through the process of isomorphism—little is left of the institution’s spiritual heritage, and the motto has been reduced simply to *Veritas* (Greer and Horst 2014, 16-18). The same history and spiritual heritage are true of Yale University, which has also significantly isomorphized. Another good example is that of the Christian Children’s Fund founded in 1938 in China as a Christian child development agency to help relieve global poverty among children, instituted by the American missionary Calvitt Clarke. Lin observes that the charity “has since lost its Christian roots, and in 2009 changed its name to Childfund International” (2019, 72) in order to conform to current rules and practices for international NGOs and to gain legitimacy in that organizational field. Obviously, this isomorphic process improves the chances for the existential survival of Christian NGOs/NPOs, but in turn it may mean compromise involving demands that are difficult to satisfy without acting in a way that is inconsistent with their mission doctrine and belief. For parachurch agencies, there is a real danger of ignoring their Christian identity and missional understanding if they are in a regular relationship with agencies that do not share their faith. It is from this perspective that one participant in this study’s empirical research goes on to unequivocally state that *some of the so-called parachurch holistic agencies have lost their Christian faith identity and mission values due to these organizational challenges* (Interviewee 16, 8 May 2020). Another participant reveals that *many parachurch agencies choose to partner with bigger institutions and governments for survival, consequently, drifting from their first holistic mission objectives* (Interviewee 5, 25 April 2020). In addressing these isomorphic issues, Interviewee 6 discloses that their *NPO experienced mission drift because they have partnered with a successful humanitarian NGO in training farmers, as their mission required significant fundraising that became time consuming* (19 January 2020). In the same vein, it should be noted that three other types of mechanism associated with isomorphism lead to similarity between agencies (normative theory, coercive theory, and mimetic theory).

Spectrum Analysis

The challenges faced by parachurch agencies in their holistic mission activities lie on the three spectra of bureaucratization, professionalization, and dechristianization.

Spectrum of Bureaucratization

Bureaucratization as a regulatory spectrum in parachurch NGOs/NPOs describes a process involving managing and administering an agency by increasing controls: opting for an increase in professional management, which involves hierarchical coordination and an adherence to rigid policies and procedures. Most church-related organizations are going through a long, slow, and yet steady drift towards more bureaucratization. This drift involves more controls: regulations and the apparatus of report filing are created for them and for the voluntary practitioners who aim to offer holistic service. The system is created to maximize efficiency but has the potential to trap and negate individual and organizational freedom to do mission (Künkler 2018, 195). Bureaucratization as a regulatory spectrum is essentially a centralized form of administration and operates in a different fashion from an *ad hoc* approach in which supervision is decentralized. Barnett and Finnemore (2004, 17-18) have defined bureaucratization as encompassing four features:

- 1) A hierarchy that clearly outlines the spheres of competence, expertise, and divisions of workforce with a strict chain of command;
- 2) A structural continuity where the administrators have a full-time paid job and an advanced position within the structure;
- 3) A system of impersonality and rationality which prescribes operating rules rather than arbitrary practices and actions for mission purposes; and,
- 4) A concept of expertise, which chooses practitioners according to professional merit and prefers trained officials who hold access to knowledge rather than, as is the present case, Christians with faith-based patrimonial, kinship, and charismatic authority.

Religious sociologists from the wider field of sociology consider faith-based NGOs as bureaucracies (Lin 2019, 56). Studies by Chapman (1991, 20), Samuel (2010, 134), and Ward (2015, 83) have looked at the impact of the spectrum of bureaucratization over time on the church and have argued that as church-related agencies become more bureaucratic, the focus of the church's mission will tend to concentrate more on functional aspects. In relation to the effects of this spectrum, Interviewee 22 attests that their *Christian faith-based NGO has revised its administrative policies and professional procedures in order to meet international institutional requirements* (30 April 2020). Consequently, bureaucratization has the propensity to generate incompatible mission practices. Policymakers tend to be more and more professional, and decisions are taken grounded on the value of their professional function. As a result, theology, the substance of Christian faith, as Lin argues, "Takes a back seat to the day-to-day operations dominated by the functional issues of bureaucracy" (2019, 56). Using a similar logic, Grint (2005, 108-09) maintains that the spectrum of bureaucratization leads to an increase in legality and rationality, in which reasonable actions (based on rational principles, expert knowledge, calculability and common sense) oppose affective traditional Christian actions (based on religious convictions and motives).

The establishment of bureaucratization in parachurch agencies may underlie the drift of Christian faith ideals through which their God-given objectives are left behind in favour of the progress of their organizations. Mangayi notes with pertinence that "instead of religious and moral ideals guiding our lives, we are governed and controlled by economic and bureaucratic principals, resulting in a sad decline in the fabric and cohesion of social life" (2016, 148). To this effect, this research shows that rationalization as a spectrum of bureaucratization causes

the increase of influence by a variety of investors. Mangayi's analysis explains why Christian identity is becoming less and less central to the processes of Christian faith-based NGOs/NPOs.

Spectrum of Professionalization

The spectrum of professionalization moves through a slow process that brings professional demarcation into the agency, along with an emphasis on high social status and conformity to knowledge-authorities. This creeping change in turn creates a hierarchical social system undermining the faith-based system. Thus, professionalization establishes within the parachurch agency a narrow elite who retain power, prestige, and privileges, and who are somehow cut off from the common staff because of their elevated station in the organization (Weeden 2002, 55). As a consequence of the operation of this spectrum, managers—in contrast to staff—are seen as professionals, and decisions are taken in line with their professional function and values. Following this train of thought, Interviewee 16 declares that their *church-related agency was paid and entrusted by the State to care for immigrants coming into the country*. Furthermore, this interview respondent added that, *regrettably, being accountable to the state meant that the NGO was required to hire professionals regardless of their spiritual background and, as a result, some of them (mainly atheists and Muslims) openly hindered the spiritual activities and opposed the sharing of the gospel* (23 May 2020).

Jochemsen argues that professional spectra set the *standards* of excellence which are meant to be “the rules of play as understood by the practice. They are the know how required to realize the *telos* of the practice. These rules are embodied in professional conduct consisting in the ability to act according to a rule and to assess the correctness of this application even without making the rule explicit” (2006, 104). The professionalization of church-related organizations arises not so much from the rising educational standards of mission workers as from the intertwining of religion-based and secular-oriented mission practices (Semple 2003, 191). The end result is a conflict involving social status and vision with radical change as a possible consequence.

From this consequential perspective, Interviewee 31 (5 May 2020) echoes this view, noting that *high professional managers who have proven their performance in the business sector will definitely engage workforce for the NGO with no consideration of their spiritual background, thus leading the agency down the road of dechristianization and secularization*. In this respect, Interviewee 32 affirms that their *board of directors and management have decided to hire non-religionists for strategic positions in the name of professionalism. As a result, this Christian holistic agency has become more and more a professional, humanitarian, international NGO—with little or no Christian values* (25 June 2020). In addressing these issues, Williams (2017, 464) suggest that the downside of professionalization is that it threatens to subordinate the agencies to its own large-scale mission objectives, thus also threatening the voluntary principles that have long been at the centre of Christian mission—a mission that involves both social and spiritual ministries. In line with this view, one analyst notes that Christianity must reject the institutionalization of Christian faith and work that leads to the professionalization of Christian holistic mission (Takashi, 2013, 93). Christian NGOs/NPOs need to professionalize their holistic mission without secularizing it. In summation, the spectrum of professionalization and its managerial model can be an immense social gift for parachurch agencies, because of its unprecedented ability to enlarge the boundaries of God's Kingdom, but this process necessitates detachment from its slow-moving and gradual controlling model that drifts these organizations from their God-given mission. Now, this research is focusing on the spectral impact of dechristianization on Christian agencies.

Spectrum of Dechristianization

The contemporary faith-crisis in Western societies is favourable to mission drift, as steady dechristianization increases the global secularization of Christian faith-based mission agencies. Speaking about dechristianization, one always thinks it is inevitably a European issue. When one speaks globally, Christianity appears to be the fastest-growing religion, while in the developed countries, the social significance of Christian faith seems to have decreased. However, Pasture (2013, 367) note that the social significance of Christianity in the United States appears to have increased. Despite the apparent worldwide growth of Christianity, dechristianization is evidenced by socio-cultural changes in the West.

To grasp the significance of dechristianization and the mission drift that has taken place in Christianity since the Second World War, one should look across Christian faith to analyse the whole religious spectrum. It becomes more and more obvious that one should assess major socio-cultural changes in relation to religion and to Christianity in particular. To this effect, one participant in this empirical research aptly states that *the economic-cultural context, coupled with the high bureaucratization and professionalization of institutions, the pursuit of higher levels of performance, and the obsession with growth for its own sake—without any spiritual considerations—has triggered the total dechristianization and secularization of their parachurch organization* (Interviewee 31, 5 May 2020).

Following this train of thought, Bailey points to the Orthodox Church's struggle against the reality of dechristianization in Russian society and its negative impact on Christian mission (2001, 156 & 216). In a further development of Bailey's view, van Luijk describes how, due to cultural and economic change in the West, dechristianization came to refer not only to the desertion of the Christian faith by a "growing number of individual Europeans and Americans, but also, and primarily, to the demolition of the traditional presence of the church in the public sphere" (2016, 247). Moreover, van Luijk argues that dechristianization also causes the abandonment of Christian faith, and that the mission of Christian institutions suffers as a result (2016, 247). Roy argues that dechristianization in Europe is associated with the abandonment of religiosity by the sophisticated and middle working classes (2020, 31-33). The speed at which this happens varies: in France it was sudden, but in Ireland the drop in commitment to faith was preceded by a long decline.

Dechristianization is a phenomenon characterized by a retreat from sacred mission, holistic mission involvement, Christian life and practice, the social obligations of Christians, and normative Christian values. This kind of spectrum can push holistic mission NGOs/NPOs into experiencing mission drift. Dechristianization sometimes results from sociological mutations such as modernization. Parachurch missionary agencies still endure in spite of dechristianization, but this does not guarantee their continuation in the future when their Bible-based mission may be relentlessly affected by modernization and globalized secularization.

Conclusion

The implications of this study's research are that church-related NGOs/NPOs and the Church must be able to collaboratively discover and respect their respective roles in God's mission of holistic transformation. Christianity needs holistic practitioners who have been professionally educated and trained to overcome modern worldviews (seen in the form of pressures and challenges, and explained by the theories and spectrums this article has explored) and to "use the Bible and theology, along with their understanding of spirituality, in order to infuse and shape their transformational development theory and practice. They must be able to think theologically about their holistic work and especially their actions: acting theologically is an important skill" Woolnough (2011, 200). Mission drift is a symmetric concept in the first place

before becoming a spiritual or a socio-humanitarian issue, which presumes that both aspects of the holistic nature of Christian faith-based mission are vital to the agency.

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