

Bringing the Bible to bear on issues of trust in society

General propositions about trust in society

- Almost all acts of human co-operation contain an element of trust.
- All human groups can be described as systems of trust where people co-operate together to achieve things that they cannot do as individuals.
- The fruitfulness of a society depends upon effective systems of co-operation.
- Co-operative systems use a whole range of disciplines to mediate between individual and collective interests. These include customs, manners, morals and laws.
- All systems of trust depend upon most people going along with the system. This is crucially dependent on public confidence, which is maintained by
 - wise structuring of the systems so there is an expectation that they will work,
 - trustworthiness being prized as a virtue,
 - effective systems of policing against those who would abuse the system
 - a general psychological disposition to trust (or basic trust)
- When there is a generalised breakdown in public confidence in a society all hell breaks loose eg Argentina's money crisis, Montreal police strike 1969, Baghdad after 'liberation'.

Problems with trust in high modernity

Anthony Giddens was one of the first to focus on the fact that societies are acutely dependent on trust and that our situation in 'high' modernity was perilous in this regard. In *Consequences of Modernity* he noticed how the forces of modernisation proceeding from the Enlightenment had set in train massive changes in society. People and institutions were now 'disembedded' from their traditional association with place. The new society would be in a continual flux. Face to face relationships would decline. How would this mobile, new society develop an adequate sense of trust to maintain co-operation as traditional, relatively static structures declined? He noticed the importance of trust at a psychological level. He called this basic trust and saw its primary source in the care offered to us as children. In *Modernity and Self-Identity* he traces the rise in the counselling industry as evidence of the existential anxiety caused by modern living.

It may be that there are actually three vital contributors to the nurturing of basic trust:

- The treatment we receive as children
- The face to face conversations that go on through our lives
- Religious faith

Biblical faith and basic trust

Belief in God appeared to give people a general confidence that their lives and the situation of the world were in the hands of one who could be trusted. This is a form of basic trust and an important contributor to a flourishing society.

Examples of the expression of basic trust:

His steadfast love endures for ever (Ps118 and many others)

The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want (Ps23)

The Lord is my rock, and my fortress and my deliverer (Ps18)

In thee O Lord I take refuge (Ps11)

The Lord is my light and my salvation whom shall I fear (Ps27)

Our Father in Heaven

The loss of moral imagination

Our society today can be accused of being over-legalistic. Our compensation culture encourages everyone to go to court over everything.

Health and safety rules have reached the point where all sorts of good and worthwhile initiatives are prevented and absurd decisions are made in terms of spending priorities. Much of our ideas about citizenship are now couched in terms of rights and protected by law. It can be argued that the decline of trust has led to a risk-averse society, decreased our openness and creativity and stultified our moral imagination.

Biblical faith, trust and moral/legal sensitivities

The basic trust that comes through biblical faith is personal and calls forth a love that looks to live for God. It thereby fosters moral and legal sensitivity, which are vital to building systems of trust in society (see general propositions).

For example: From Ps119

I have laid up thy word in my heart that I may not sin against thee (v11)
I will meditate on all thy precepts and fix my eyes on thy ways (v15)
Give me understanding that I may keep thy law and observe it with my whole heart (v34)

Also the Ten Commandments – as the core moral and legal code powerfully reflect the perceived calling to be trustworthy people eg do not bear false witness, steal, commit adultery etc.

Such a trust/covenant relationship has the capacity to nurture the whole spectrum of discipline required in the creation of effective systems of trust from moral imagination through to the law itself. It also shows the capacity to provide correction when one element becomes pre-dominant.

So, for example, over-legalistic approaches are confronted by Jesus

You have heard that it was said an eye for an eye.../do not commit adultery/do not swear falsely – but I say to you....Sermon on the Mount
CH Dodd argues that the whole purpose of this discourse is to open up the moral imagination.

Similarly

Woe to you scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites for you cleanse the outside of the cup and of the plate, but inside you are full of extortion and rapacity (Mt 23v25)

Building the life of institutions

When the conditions are right then systems of trust spontaneously form. Examples from our history include the use of money, medieval guilds, the Friendly Societies of the 18th/19th centuries, educational systems, insurance and medical funds. Each are orientated around a clear co-operative gain. (see *Exploring Citizenship through Trust* for more detail)

Robert Putnam (*Bowling Alone*) has revealed how much of this co-operation is actually based around the formation of a set of relationships whereby the cost of social transactions is lowered. He describes this as 'social capital'. This is an economic description of what we are calling systems of trust.

Matt Ridley (*Origins of Virtue*) gives a sociobiological description of the evolution of systems of trust together with an account of the importance of trustworthiness to any society.

One key issue of our time is how to develop global systems to deal with pressing problems like global warming, international terrorism, people migration, and trade justice. Institutions like the UN, WTO and others may be the precursors of more effective and just international political structures

The role of faith in the formation and consolidation of institutions in biblical communities

The times of Judges through 1 Samuel were clearly very rough. It may be that this period illustrates how faith can encourage the formation of institutions, developing civil society and a sense of working together in a trust. This process may bear some analogy with our own struggle to form global institutions today.

What encouraged these tribes to work together?

There were some very pragmatic considerations. There was a clear co-operative gain to be had in the shape of security. Enemies pressed on every side. The tribal coalition may have been strongly encouraged by the threat of being overrun and there is evidence that they imposed forms of discipline on any who might let them down. Such disciplines are an essential part of any system of trust.

See Deborahs' Song shaming the tribe of Reuben and others for not joining in the battle (Jdg 5 v 15-18) or Saul threatening to destroy the herd of any who did not join him against Nahash the Ammonite(1 Sam 11v 7).

There were also specific fruits of faith which may have been vital in the successful formation of a united society. These may give clues as to how faith might help foster international co-operation today.

What is needed to promote international co-operation today?

The key questions might be:

How can we find **vision** for working together?

How can a **legal and moral system** develop internationally?

How will the people of the world feel to be genuine **participants** in these global systems and so own them as their own?

Will **stories** arise that consolidate the common purpose?

How should **leadership** be authorised?

How did faith help the tribes of Israel to co-operate?

Faith was an important ingredient in binding the tribes together and allowing the formation of institutions.

They had a common **vision** of God to which they were committed. See the covenant at Shechem – we will serve Yahweh.(Josh 24)

This was buttressed in a developing **legal and moral system**. The so-called 'Book of the Covenant' (Exod 19 –24) may date from round this time, illustrates the sort of primitive laws that a prestate society would work with and was prefaced by the Ten Commandments.

The union was consolidated in a ritual of covenant renewal, which was later (post David) focussed in Jerusalem. This would have fostered a sense of **participation** in the union. Evidence of these rituals is found in the Songs of Ascents eg Ps 122 'the tribes go up'.

The vision for working together was consolidated in rehearsal of the common **story**. Eg Pss 105 and 106 may have been used at these festival times.

Leadership of the emerging institutions was authorised by the faith story

Eg the priesthood was legitimised by the stories of Moses, in particular by Moses special face to face relationship with God.

The description of Moses judging the people and the appointment of others to the task implicitly justified the development of a legal system.

The eventual appointment of a king was justified through the stories of David with particular reference to the Davidic covenant (2 Sam 7 v14, Ps 132). Kings were enthroned in a religious ceremony (see Ps 2, 72 etc) This was coupled with the development of Zionism (Ps 132 v13) which legitimated the nation and Jerusalem in particular as central to God's purposes.

Calling the institutions and their leaders to account

All institutions have the capacity to lose their way or abuse their power. They naturally form an 'establishment' which blocks change and fails to consider the marginalised.

Voices are required that speak out against **corruption** of leadership. In our society this role is increasingly played by investigative journalism. Freedom of the press and freedom of information are crucial to a healthy society. It is vital to watch how the current uneasy embrace of media and politics turns out. Government-controlled media are a danger to society.

Establishment institutions can **lose touch with proper social sympathies**.

They can become ideological to an extent people are ignored or hurt.

Examples include communism and the free market. A strong hand of management can also produce a similar effect. Our performance indicator culture may be a case in point.

Faith and accountability

When faith is involved in consolidating institutions and legitimising them they are particularly prone to becoming ossified and failing to be accountable.

But a biblical faith in God who is over all should give some openness to accountability in every leader and open the possibility of their critique by others. There are examples throughout the scripture of people of faith, who felt inspired by God to work against **corrupt** leadership:

'I looked for righteousness but I saw bloodshed, I looked for justice but behold, a cry.'
Isaiah 5 – the Song of the Vineyard

Hear this you heads of Jacob.. who tear the skin off my people and their flesh from their bones Micah 3)

Woe to you that are full now for you shall weep... (Luke 6 v25)

They bind heavy burdens hard to bear...but they themselves wont move a finger (Matt 23)

Come now you rich weep and howl for the miseries that are coming upon you...you have kept back the wages of the harvesters...(James 5)

Sometimes a whole institution would lose touch with social sympathies and a proper moral engagement. The prophets frequently complained against 'automatic' views of obtaining God's favour that ruled out a **proper moral sensitivity**

eg Jeremiah's Temple Sermon. Do not trust in these deceptive words the Temple of the Lord, the Temple of the Lord, the Temple of the Lord...Amend your ways and your actions, execute justice with one another, do not oppress the foreigner... (Jer 7)

Jeremiah was also willing to confront the monarchy in devastating tone see Jer 22 v13 –19

This critique may have reached its most profound in Amos, where he denounces all the nations round about including Israel and Judah for cruelty toward people. His Oracles to the Nations (Amso 1-6) are effectively a statement that says that there are some things people should never do to one another, an idea that may be related to some of our human rights language today. His critique includes the extraordinary claim that the exodus from Egypt did not make the faith community special in God's eyes. He had done similar for several other nations. (Amos 9v7) To subvert the meta-narrative in this way is to strike at the heart of national and religious identity. He did it in order to defend a compassionate view of the world and of God.

For a useful resource on faith upholding the social order and critiquing it see Rex Mason *Propaganda and subversion in the Old Testament*
Also several of Brueggemann's writings are helpful eg *Hope within History*

Building trust in situations of conflict

When conflict situations set in and tit for tat violence becomes commonplace, there is a general erosion of trust.

We have seen this in Northern Ireland.

It is now being played out in the Middle East.

The key missing strategy in Iraq may be how to build trust.

Some say that today's Britain is strong in terms of racial harmony and that this stems from serious attempts to foster understanding between the different peoples who live here.

Summary

Biblical faith can play a crucial role in

- **developing and nurturing the conditions necessary for the formation of civil society**
- **building and consolidating institutional life**
- **holding these systems in a state of creative accountability**

Building trust in the conflict situation of the New Testament

Jesus was expected to be the zealot, freedom fighter or even, terrorist. This was a common conception of Messiah in that day.

He re-interpreted that role offering a vision of the kingdom of God that

- Would come gradually as yeast in dough
- Would begin with small things that ultimately became significant (mustard seed)
- He told stories against those who looked for immediate results

His teaching and actions combined to offer an understanding of this kingdom as

- A situation where outcast people (like lepers) were brought back into society
- Where unconsidered (women, children) people were made real to others
- Where hated people were forgiven (Zachaeus, Matthew) or even used as a sign of goodness (Samaritan).

This can be conceived as a radical strategy toward reconciliation and inclusion.

This was no easy strategy. The way to peace that Jesus exemplified was by way of a cross.