

## God, Church, and Collapsing Banks

God speaks to me from the most unlikely directions

I've been reading a book called *Fool's Gold* about the 2007-8 financial crash. It's written by a Financial Times journalist named Gillian Tett.

Being interested in the subject, I found it a reasonably good read, but it was only at the end, in the Epilogue, that it really hit home to me. Here she moves from straight history to a more subjective reflection on her personal reactions, and here I found something that seems relevant not just to the way in which banks and hedge funds work, but also to the workings of institutions in general and in particular the church.

Before going into financial journalism Gillian obtained a PhD in social anthropology, and it's on this anthropological background that she draws in a couple of highly significant sentences:

***'Anthropology also instills a sense of skepticism about official rhetoric. . . In most societies elites try to maintain their power not simply by garnering wealth, but also by dominating the mainstream ideologies in terms of both what is said and what is not discussed. Social silences serve to maintain power structures in ways that participants often barely understand themselves, let alone plan.'***

I find these sentences quite extraordinarily perceptive, and as relevant to understanding church structures as they are to the world of high finance. Let's just look a bit at what she's saying.

The financial crash was to a large extent the result of a received wisdom that emanated from a few so-called 'experts' and was followed lemming-like by many others. In the frenzy it became virtually impossible for any deeply involved parties to stand back and make a measured and rational analysis of what was going on. The bankers pressured the ratings agencies into giving triple-A ratings to wildly unsound derivative products, and then blindly believed those same ratings in their own dealings with those products. Error became the received wisdom, and those who could actually see the truth were derided. Disaster duly followed.

One of the more famous quotes to emerge from that era was from Chuck Prince, then the chairman of Citigroup, in July 2007: . . . *as long as the music is playing, you've got to get up and dance. We're still dancing.* Even he, running one of the largest banks in America, found himself ultimately trapped in the rhetoric, impotent to break free even though he seems to have had a fair idea where it was all going to end.

How does this relate to church?

Fairly simple. Churches have elites just like other organizations. Climbing the power structure, getting to the top and staying there, is a fundamental instinct of the natural man, and it manifests as much in the church as anywhere else. That's what pharisaism is all about.

And how do church elites maintain their power? True, it's not usually by **'garnering wealth'**. But **'dominating the mainstream ideologies'**, as Gillian puts it, is right in the centre of what church hierarchies are all about. And how do you dominate the ideology? Simple, as she goes on to explain. You control the discussion agenda and through that you control the ideology.

I'm constantly struck by just how little *is* discussed and how much *is not* discussed in church. In the church I attend we have essentially only one sermon, which is repeated with minor variations week after week. Since our church has a somewhat pharisaic orientation that sermon can be summed up in two words, *'Try harder!'* And apart from that there's really nothing at all that ever gets talked about in any meaningful way.

We have the gospel of course, in a more or less acceptable form (though there's never any real discussion about just what the gospel actually is—just a straight dogma expressed in ideological terms). And that, in a narrow sense, is indeed preached. But there it ends. There's no real discussion of anything else at all.

So for example, there's no discussion of the relationship of science to Christianity, a particular interest of mine. At a guess I would say that 50% of the church are creationists and 50% are evolutionists. In a mature and responsible society one might expect some discussion of the issue, with an attempt to establish, in love, a basis of mutual respect. But no. There's just silence. Has no one else even noticed?

There's no discussion of another interest of mine—how we look at the bible, how we understand it, and why we understand it the way we do. There's just a received ideology which is almost certainly wrong but no one dares to question for fear of being branded a trouble-maker or even a 'liberal'.

And then there's the hierarchical power structure itself, but certainly no discussion of whether God actually even *likes* hierarchical power structures.

Really there's no discussion about anything at all. And any attempt at wider discussion is liable to be interpreted as an act of rebellion. As Gillian says, it's the silence that maintains the power structure. The hierarchy dominate the ideology not by dominating the discussion, but by ensuring that the discussion never takes place at all!

And the scary thing about it all is that it's done **' . . . in ways that participants often barely understand themselves, let alone plan.'** The most frightening thing about the Pharisee church is that it's run in great part by totally sincere people. They've taken the bible as their magic book; they've read a few out-of-context remarks about hierarchies; and they've concluded in a rather self-serving manner, and in complete defiance of everything that Jesus ever taught or said, that God actually likes hierarchies.

Not only do they dominate the ideology by silencing all discussion, but they think that God has put them there for that specific purpose. In comparison to this the bankers with their garnered wealth appear relative simpletons, positively benign even.

It's totally contrary to anything that Jesus Christ ever taught or said or did, of course. But when did that ever matter? It's a scary thing, isn't it?