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Spirituality at Work: A Comparative Perspective

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The recent flurry of interest in the subject of spirituality at work (which I will refer to as SAW for convenience) has diverse sources and many destinations, and will impact whatever is in its path in different ways. In the following piece, I try to distinguish the different sources, destinations and impacts.

Sources

It is clear that New Age-type influences are the principal contributors to the current fashion for SAW. However, we must not forget that these influences have been widespread in the West since at least the nineteenth century. Why then has that spark become a flame? In my view, because of two principal reasons.

The first reason is the progressive psychological and cultural dryness caused for the last century or so (from the 1880s in Europe and from the 1930s in the USA), when the commanding heights of intellectual and public life became captive to evolutionistic atheism. The result today is a raging but unslaked desire for meaning in an increasing number of people of all generations.

The second reason is the psychological pressure on time, created by the increased complexity and insistent need to choose, for example between a growing range of relatively meaningless choices in consumer goods. This increase in time-pressure, complexity and choice has been specially marked since the fall of the Berlin Wall some twelve years ago.

Specifically in the USA, the attacks of September 11 have also raised again questions regarding spirituality, meaning, culture, ethics and the world's issues.

An additional contributor to the fashion for SAW is Christianity, which provides both a sort of faded backcloth without which such a fashion could not exist, and several rather more colourful banners led either by clergy and other such "professional" religious leaders (such as industrial chaplaincy, Ridley Hall Foundation, the London Institute for Contemporary Christianity, the erstwhile Centre for Marketplace Theology, Marketplace Ministries, the scruples website www.scruples.org, and so on), and on the other hand by prayer and Bible-study groups led by lay people in their organizations (e.g. Barclays Christian Fellowship and the Civil Service Christian Fellowship – though there are also innumerable small informal groups which do not necessarily give themselves a name) as well as across organizations (e.g. The National Prayer Breakfast, The Trinity Forum). The general revival of Christianity, specially among young people in the West, has brought into the workplace a new generation of people who are unashamed about their spirituality and wish to relate their faith to their everyday life as well as to world issues –

in complete contrast to their parents' generation, as well as to older generations, who were generally both individualistic about their faith (not seeing any relationship with world issues) and kept their faith private (most of their colleagues had no idea of whether and if so what sort of faith they had).

In a minority of places in the West, the Islamic practice of praying five times a day has added a certain spurt in consciousness.

However, the resulting consensus in the Western fashion for SAW is marked by evolutionistic pantheism – the idea that we have all evolved as a result of some sort of primordial consciousness which is impersonal but expresses Itself through, and more importantly in, everything and everyone. This is not to say that the consensus is closed to other orientations, merely that it is resistant to them.

Destinations

(i) Individual

The bulk of the current fashion for spirituality at work drives in the direction of what Francis Schaeffer called “personal peace and affluence”. As one goes through the literature on the subject of spirituality at work, one soon tires of the usual drivel and platitudes that get served up, from the bland to the inconsequential, about personal morality in business as if that is the most important dimension. Here is an example of such a purely individualistic search for “peace”:

"So, what's up with "spirituality in the workplace?" I don't know with any degree of certainty, but I think what we're really wanting....as CEOs and managers, business owners and workers....is space. Space to wonder and to create our sense of the spiritual. More meaningful lives....for ourselves and for those around us whether coworkers or customers, family or friends. What we most long for is a sense of peace.... And, when I hear about an organization that is "spiritually based" it's really not about the organization. It's about the people. Wanting to create spirituality in the workplace? Start with yourself. The rest will follow and it won't be about the company. It will be about you and the wonderful effect you will have on those around you....coworkers and customers alike without your even knowing. Want to take a shortcut and just "implement" it? Maybe create spiritually-based mission statements...a set of spiritually-based goals? I wouldn't bother. Just create the space. That's what's needed." (Butch Farley, “Corporate Spirituality”, CoachU newsletter, Volume 3 Issue 1, April 2001. This Internet newsletter had 13,325 subscribers on that date, though material from the newsletter is e-distributed by subscribers to numerous non-subscribers regularly. The underlinings in the quotation above are mine)

Such a search for “space” can be rather self-indulgent if it stops at that level. However, not all SAW stays purely at the personal level.

Here, for example, is someone who raises questions about SAW from the perspective of a consultant writing for other consultants involved in coaching people at work:

Corporate doors are cracking open. ... Many of us are getting high on visions of fat corporate fees and the huge potential to do good. But before we start soaring, we have to ask ourselves "What's fuelling the rush towards spirituality in the workplace?" Has Soul truly entered the workplace, replacing "Swim with the Sharks" and the "One-Minute Manager" mentality, or does it just seem like it has? Today's corporate leaders are up against enormous pressures. With earnings slowing and employee loyalty at an all time low, business leaders are desperately seeking effective strategies to re-engage their people. Workers are asked to do far too much with far too little and the only thing holding them is the almighty dollar! Twelve-hour days and information overload are facts of life. The current economic downturn reminds workers of their ultimate expendability. Employees are asking, "What value is there in what I do?" A 36 year-old rants, "I just got the promotion I've been dreaming of - a substantial raise, a new title and a great bonus to come. Am I happy? No way! Instead of a 60-hr week, now I'll have an 80-hr workweek!" Just as top management is scrambling to find a new panacea, in walks the Spirituality in the Workplace movement!

(Karen Sands, "A skeptic's view of the Feminization of Capitalism", Coach U Internet newsletter, Vol 3/1, April 2001)

Such scepticism, regarding the instrumental reasons why certain managers and managements are not just tolerating SAW but actually encouraging it, is entirely justified. However, I am pleased to see that some people don't remain fixated by scepticism about SAW, but use the opportunity provided by it. Indeed, some individuals and groups go beyond the merely self-indulgent level of SAW, to generating an interest in wider matters and indeed begin to do something about them, as we shall see later in this article.

However, most such individualistic spirituality, Eastern as it may be considered in origin, I compare to the use of aspirin or panadol. Whether it appears in the garb of Buddhism, yoga, Tai-Chi, various meditative traditions or prayer, its function is simply to relieve stress. But such individualistic SAW can be open to, interested in, or even willing to be involved in wider matters.

(ii) Work Team

SAW at the level of work teams tends to be both more challenging and more useful. Why challenging? Because everyone in a team may not be equally comfortable about the spiritual tradition or traditions proposed or being used. So why more useful? Because, if the team can find a common commitment to a spiritual tradition that it wishes to use, then this tradition could at least in theory help relationships in the team as well as possibly the creativity of the team and the effectiveness with which it achieves its goals.

At this level too, work teams may take a purely neutral approach to the question of the wider relevance of spirituality – for example, they may not raise questions about how the work they do fits into the larger scheme of things in their organisation. Of course if they are open or committed to exploring such questions in the light of their spirituality, they will soon find themselves looking at the implications of SAW for the organisational level.

(iii) Corporate or Organisational

SAW at this level would be interested in questions such as the kind of company strategy, structure and culture the firm has as well as whether the policies, procedures and principles followed by the organisation genuinely express and create justice, peace and love within the firm as well as in its relations with outside groups, society and the world. Undoubtedly, spirituality has consequences for the stakeholder/ shareholder debate, for acquisitions and so on. For example, if strategy is about how a company is to reach certain objectives, spirituality would scrutinise both the objectives and the means by which those objectives are intended to be reached. Or, if one wants to think about the consequences for acquisitions, one may conclude that these would be invalid, from a spiritual point of view (being the corporate equivalent of rape), as distinct from friendly mergers (as these are the equivalent of marriage). Alternatively, in relation to company structure, it is worth reflecting that hierarchical structures are not forbidden, for example in the Bible, and are indeed used, but are less important than structures which *let the people go*. If one takes this seriously, the question then becomes: are my company's structures oppressive or liberating? We may ask: what is and what should be the balance between control and chaos? Or we might want to think about what was the organisational culture which the Old and New Testaments between them at different times and in different contexts attempted to create? I suggest that it was a culture marked by celebration, care, love and hope beyond the vagaries of this world.

I know of organizations where SAW at this level has a merely instrumental purpose and I also know of organizations which are committed to thorough and even costly self-examination and self-improvement at this level. The history of Service Master, Inc., which is listed on the stock exchange, and has grown astonishingly from \$600m to \$8b in revenue in the last few years of boom and bust, provides an excellent example of a company which takes the organisational aspects of spirituality at work seriously¹.

However, the extent to which companies can relate spirituality to the organisational level is limited by some of the financial, legal and economic structures which we have created, as will become quite clear when the story of BP under Sir John Browne's leadership will show when it is fully documented and available in the public realm. Capital markets, for example, are slow to incorporate environmental information into mainstream decision-making, even when a positive correlation has been established by research².

However, the key question is not about whether this or that particular aspect or mechanism or institution is "right" but rather about the sort of world that is being created at present by our industrial-military-commercial-political-economic system.

(iv) Global

Ultimately, the question for individuals and groups interested in pursuing the relevance of spirituality for this level is whether they are willing to work to change, for example, the purpose of companies as these are currently constituted in law. The purpose of companies has moved historically from that of reducing risk for shareholders to that of maximising returns for shareholders. Of course, there has always been a tension between long-term shareholder return, such as is in theory argued for by the structure of our pension fund industry, and demands for short-term (i.e. annual or half-yearly) shareholder return as is pushed for by our stock exchange system, and indeed the even shorter-term (sometimes overnight or even hourly) shareholder return as is dreamt of and worked for by fund managers. In purely legal terms, many companies particularly in the USA, feel that they would be on thin ice if they attempted to reinterpret the law (as companies such as BP are doing) to maximising returns over the long term by paying more than minimum attention to stakeholders others than shareholders. As Milton Friedman memorably put it: "Businessmen who believe that business has a 'social conscience' and take seriously its responsibilities for providing employment, eliminating discrimination, avoiding pollution and whatever else may be the catchwords of the contemporary crop of reformers ..are...preaching pure and unadulterated socialism."³ That may be the reason why Professor Peter Drucker, who is often called the "father of management" because of the extent of his influence in shaping management theory, has recently said that companies will not survive more than 25 years in the way they are constituted at present⁴

But there are also numerous ancillary questions. For example, the function of meeting needs, which companies used to perform, has now become conflated with the *marketing* function of "creating needs" as a result of the over-supply of goods and services all over the so-called "developed world".

Such artificially-created needs can cause us as a global financial and econo-political system to ignore real needs . Here, for example, was how Robert Zoellick, the US Trade Representative had to rail against the pharmaceutical industry, which was fighting to preserve its financial interests under then-current understanding of intellectual property law, to get it to begin thinking about meeting the needs of millions of AIDS sufferers in South Africa: "I'm convinced, whether it relates to child labor, forced labor, or HIV/AIDS -- and I'm sure there will be other (such issues) - that, to be successful, I and my compatriots have to get out front on these issues... and frankly, so should've the pharmaceutical companies. If they don't get ahead of this issue, the hostility that (that) generates could put at risk the whole intellectual property rights system."⁵

Indeed, The Economist, not famous for hand-wringing leftism, had already declared that the AIDS/pharma question was not the only issue in the realm of Intellectual Property law: "The economic case for (poor countries') complying with (Intellectual Property legislation) is mixed, at best... the moralistic argument that says "property is property,

and that's that" is simply false - witness the great variation even among rich countries in the form and extent of intellectual-property protection. Poor countries have every reason to question the terms of this particular trade-policy bargain." (The Economist, 14 April 2001; my emphasis).

What most people don't realise is that some of the distortions (noted above) in our economic, financial and legal structures are a result of another more fundamental distortion: the whole international financial system is now based on usury (the charging of interest⁶ on the use of money). Usury is a mechanism which is specifically forbidden in every ancient religion and tradition, for example, the Jewish Bible (which Christians call the Old Testament), in the New Testament, in the Koran⁷, in the Indian Scriptures, in Chinese tradition, among the Greeks, Romans, Native Americans, tribal religions, and so on. Usury inevitably creates a system which grows faster and faster and eventually grows cancerously fast, in the meanwhile creating a super-rich class as against a super-poor class, and pitting them against each other. Ultimately, usury leads to a financial system in which economic efficiency comes to be pitted against what is morally right. Here is an apposite definition of the economic concept called "moral hazard" by a student writing a final exam for her or his undergraduate degree: "moral hazard involves problems that arise when morality gets in the way of doing what is right." (sent to the History of Economics Society website on 13 May 2001 by Kevin Quinn who was then marking final exam scripts).

Impacts - or, what can people actually do?

It is natural and right that individuals and groups should seek to relate their spirituality to their own level and to their own stresses and strains and the challenges they face as individuals and groups. This "jujube-level" of spirituality is merely the minimum that spirituality has to offer. Unfortunately, much contemporary spirituality, Eastern and Western, remains stuck at this level, or even at the level of "spectator sport" (come to the temple or mosque, and don't bother with whether and how this relates to work or to the world). In this respect, much Evangelicalism is as poor as Roman Catholicism: the view seems to be: "Come to church on Sunday, try to be a good person, and don't ask if all that has anything to do with the struggles and efforts of your organisation every day. Much of contemporary Christianity betrays its own spiritual roots by what I call an "incense view" of life - that the primary purpose of life lies in "worship" (as in the song: "the reason I live/ Is to worship You"). Actually, as far as I can understand the teaching of Jesus the Lord, a relationship with Him is meant to be like "dynamite" (or, to use his own imagery, like yeast or like a tree growing, breaking up everything around and making something new and greater instead): we are here to be revolutionised and to revolutionise work and the workplace and the world, while of course doing our assigned job well. This is very different from the view of some other gurus who would have us perform only our own jobs as well as possible, without asking wider questions (as in "bhakti-yoga" and "karma-yoga").

So what does that mean, for example for someone working in a bank? It means of course doing one's own job as well as one can, because without that you don't have any basis and any credibility to do anything else. But then, once you have that base and

that credibility, working to change the system. It may mean arguing against relying on interest-based income, and working to reduce it by, for example, increasing the amount of money committed to venture capital. It may mean arguing against the use of derivatives (in some Islamic thinking, derivatives are equated with gambling). Or, to take a concrete example, the world of "private banking" has been accused of not doing enough to prevent money laundering, and one of my colleagues took the initiative to bring together 10 more of the world's largest private banks, and they have together agreed the "Wolfsberg Principles" which are meant to address the problem (see www.wolfsberg-principles.com). For each industry, and every level in that industry, we have to think through what the practical implications of spirituality are, and I am afraid such thinking is only just beginning.

Conclusion

We live in an age of increasing pessimism⁸. More and more people seem to believe that their actions can have little effect in changing things. Such a belief is nothing less than the Devil's lie. The fact is that it is finally only individuals who make a difference. As the history of the Reformation shows, it takes a whole generation to live and work sacrificially in order to produce cultural change. But the Reformation was started by individuals such as Jan Hus and Martin Luther and John Calvin. Each of us is responsible before God for how he or she lives his life. We have been given much, and from us much will be demanded on the great day of Accounting which we will all have to face. We may never become famous, like Luther, but ultimately it was the mass of unknown Anabaptists who actually made for cultural change.

Footnotes:

1. For a good account of the philosophy of the company, see The Soul of the Firm by William Pollard, Harper & Row, USA, 1996
2. *"A significant body of research shows a moderate positive correlation between firms' environmental performance and their financial performance.... However, capital markets have been slow to incorporate environmental information into mainstream investment decision-making"* (US Environmental Protection Agency,
3. Milton Friedman, "The Social Responsibility of Business is to Increase Its Profits", The New York Times Magazine, September 13, 1970 (the full text of the article is available on various websites, e.g. <http://homepages.bw.edu/~dkrueger/BUS329/readings/friedman.html>).
4. "The corporation as we know it, which is now 120 years old, is unlikely to survive the next 25 years. Legally and financially yes, but not structurally and economically" - Peter Drucker, interview in Business 2.0 magazine. USA, August 22, 2000
5. Quoted by Peter Moon of the Universities' Superannuation Scheme, in a paper presented at the Annual Conference of the National Association of Pension Funds, Birmingham, U.K., 18 May 2001.
6. Historically, in the West, usury meant the charging of any interest at all. However, after the Roman Catholic Church lifted the ban on usury in the eleventh century, "usury" came to mean the charging of more than a "reasonable" amount of interest. Today, in many Western countries, there is no legal limit on the amount of interest that can be charged, so that "loan sharks" do actually operate within the law.
7. In the Koran, usury is one of the gravest sins „he who takes interest wages war against Allah“. An important concept is the purification of one's sources of income „On the day of judgment, a person will not be moved from the place which he stands until he is asked about the sources of his income and the ways he spent it“. For an excellent assessment of the Islamic perspective on finance, written by two Christians, see Islamic Finance by Mills and Presley, Macmillan Press, UK, 1999 (a review essay on the book done by myself is available from me on request).
8. Oliver Bennett's Cultural Pessimism: Narratives of Decline in the Postmodern World, Edinburgh University Press, 2001, charts the growth of pessimism in the West during the last decades of the twentieth century: "Cultural pessimism arises with the conviction that the culture of a nation, a civilisation or of humanity itself is in a process of irreversible decline".

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