Marketing God: A Critical Inquiry into Spirituality in the Workplace

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Abstract: This paper examines the way spirituality is co-opted and commodified to serve the interests of the marketplace from a faith-based perspective.

Introduction

We have noticed the increased frequency of the language of spirituality in both management and adult education literature. Particularly disconcerting is the way spirituality is used, or from our perspective, *mis*used. Following the work of Cox (1999) and Frank (2000), this study explores the way spirituality is co-opted and commodified to serve the interests of the marketplace. We examine the concept of spirituality as it is applied in the workplace, locating the discourse of spirituality within the context of management theory, human resource development, and organizational learning. Additionally, the research looks at spirituality from the perspective of religious activists and is grounded in the work of critical theological and religious studies. The paper concludes with a discussion of why spirituality cannot be divorced from its origins within the various religious traditions and why any discussion of spirituality and work must be connected to the work of critical theological and religious scholars. Failure to do so leads to a conception of spirituality that becomes part of a process that attempts to shape human beings to "fit" into the marketplace rather than one that sees them as true spiritual beings.

Theoretical Orientation and Research Design

Though we locate ourselves within Christianity, this study incorporates work from a multiplicity of religious traditions. Theoretically, this paper is grounded in critical religious and theological perspectives (Lerner, 2000; Wallis, 2000; Wilber, 1998), suggesting that concepts such as "soul" and "spirituality" in the workplace are used by business to further economic goals by co-opting the language of religion on an as-needed basis. One critic notes (Moskovitz, 1997) that ". . . soul is only the language of business when things are going well." Critical religious and theological scholars argue that advocates of "spirituality in the workplace" attempt to secularize and individualize spirituality in a way that removes the ideas of the sacred and profound, replacing them with a spirituality that is connected to economic productivity and the market. In addition, we reviewed books from business and Human Resource Development (HRD) literature on spirituality (e.g., Bolman & Deal, 2001; Conger, 1994; Covey, 1989). We also identified authors within the field of adult education who deliberately connect their adult education practice with notions of spirituality (e.g., Dirkx, 1997; English & Gillen, 2000; Fenwick & Lange, 1998; Schauffelle & Baptiste, 2000; Tisdell, 2000). We address the following questions: 1) How is spirituality defined and discussed in the literature? 2) What socio-political and ideological messages about spirituality are encoded in the texts? 3) What epistemological elements, messages, patterns, and themes are embedded in the texts?

Discussion

Fenwick and Lange (1998) initiated the discussion on the movement of HRD from skills-based training and career development into the manipulative uses of spirituality in the workplace. Our research extends this analysis into the socio-economic implications that enable broader and

subtler means of worker control. We start with an analysis of spirituality in business and HRD literature followed by a discussion of the religious, theological and etymological foundations of spirituality. Then we link our findings with the adult education literature on spirituality.

Spirituality in Business and HRD

We categorize business and HRD texts on spirituality and work by 1) a focus on individuals in organizations with an *implicit* spiritual theme; 2) a focus on individuals in organizations with an *explicit* spiritual theme; and 3) a focus on corporations as individuals with souls.

Focus on individuals in organizations with an implicit spiritual theme. The business literature is replete with examples of well known management gurus whose popular books disguise spiritual themes by focusing on individual responsibility in support of organizational effectiveness, learning and service (e.g., Covey, 1989; Peters, 1992; Senge, 1990). For example, Covey (1989) markets a model of "human effectiveness" (p. 23) that encourages a shift from a personality-centered paradigm focused on changing attitudes and behaviors to a principle-centered paradigm supporting the unchanging laws of nature and providing the "correct" maps for effective problem solving. The *spiritual* is one of four dimensions of renewal along with the physical, mental and social/emotional that creates a healthy balanced life. The *spiritual* provides the core commitment to one's value system. Covey espouses a value system centered on the individual, an inward examination of self with responsibility for his [sic] own success or failure.

In *Liberation Management* Tom Peters (1992) plays on a liberation theology, associated with radical social movements in support of the poor and disenfranchised, to encourage the use of workers' spirituality for the benefit of organizational effectiveness and profit. He states that,

> [S]oul, my preferred term for rules, value, vision, philosophy, whatever. . . . Work as dialogue, shared minds, and the floating crap games of project teams (of insiders and outsiders) 'tied' together by soul of some sort – that's the mostly elusive "stuff" that adds up to "beyond hierarchy" (p. 472).

In the secularized business world, vertical *soul* relates to traditional expertise while horizontal *soul* connects strategic business plans across function boundaries. Boeing finds its true *soul* with the power of systems integration and MCI's *soul* is discovered in systems and network integration (p. 333). Soul within this context refers to difference, changing how work is organized. Soul is used to transform the unpleasant to the acceptable. An executive temp service, a self-identified "body shop," is sold as "the way, the truth and the light," providing job assignments to over skilled executives, leaving them with more time to deal with the political. Soul then is about what is special and integral to the organization (p. 314). When the "subcontracting soul . . . [identifies] . . . the essence of business success . . . [as] . . . repeat business, then Skonie Corp *does soul* for medical equipment manufacturers" (p. 328). The subcontractor of parking for Marriott Hotels *does soul work* providing good customer service. Ironically, the champion of outsourcing as the only way to keep workers focused on continuously creating efficiencies in both private and public sectors recognizes that the Navy provided him tough assignments and opportunities for learning to think and act outside the box.

Senge (1990), another leadership guru, makes use of the spiritual by incorporating the language of religion, for the most part implicitly, to place increased responsibility on the individual. He defines personal mastery, one of the five disciplines of the learning organization, as "the ability to produce the results we want in life" (p. 142). Phrases like higher virtues, calling, fulfillment, and values are interspersed throughout the book. This gives the corporation a spiritual legitimacy that allows it to become one with its workers. Economic success is closely

aligned with the spiritual. Greater worker commitment translates to deeper worker responsibility at work. Workers only seeking fulfillment outside of work limit their self-development since we spend the majority of our waking hours at work. Time spent at work is an unquestioned norm. Therefore the spiritual, an important factor from the perspective of the whole person, becomes a crucial element at work. This view shifts work from the instrumental to the *sacred* in a sociological sense, not a religious sense. Purportedly, this means that workers and things are valued in and of themselves at work. The relationship between the organization and the worker moves from a contractual relationship to a relationship based on a covenant. This allows the whole worker, including the spiritual dimension, into the workplace. Most revealing is Senge's use of a statement made by Henry Ford: "What we need . . . is reinforcement of the soul by the invisible power waiting to be used . . . I know there are reservoirs of spiritual strength from which we human beings thoughtlessly cut ourselves off . . . " (Senge, 1990, p. 141).

Focus on individuals in organizations with explicit spiritual theme. Business literature and more specifically HRD literature with explicit spiritual themes include Bolman and Deal (2000) and Conger (1994). Conger (1994) uses the *trinity* to connect inward and outward dimensions of workers with spirituality defined as the inward force while the workplace and leadership are outward forces. The workplace replaces the so-called failed extended family, community and church/temple ties because there is no other place for workers to turn. Since other segments of their lifeworlds have failed, workers must turn to their workplace to find meaning and support. By default the workplace becomes the location for the *care of the soul.*

Even more explicitly *Leading with Soul* (Bolman & Deal, 2001) attempts to move beyond the main emphasis of management, a focus on body and mind, to draw attention to the neglected and deeper spiritual needs of workers. As workers take on greater responsibilities at work with the resulting requirement to take more responsibility for their self-development, the authors suggest that corporate leaders develop an awareness of workers from a holistic perspective, including the needs of their souls. "Each of us has a special contribution to make if we can shoulder the personal and spiritual work needed to discover and take responsibility for our own gifts . . . Leading with soul returns us to ancient spiritual basics – reclaiming the enduring human capacity that gives our lives passion and purpose" (p. 11-12).

Focus on corporations as individuals with souls. Texts of this genre include Cox and Liesse (1996) and Kahnweiler and Otte, (1997). These authors apply attributes of individuals to corporations, giving legitimacy to the concept of soul within the context of the marketplace. The legal formulation of the corporation with the same rights as the individual has taken place over the past 150 years. The corporation is described in terms normally reserved for individuals. The search for identity and authenticity within the context of the global market is linked to providing service to the market. Leaders and corporations are one. "[T]hese leaders are marked by a here and now contact with their own authenticity – their corporate soul" (Cox & Liesse, 1996, p. 29). Like Conger (1994), Cox and Liesse (1996) see the corporation as the replacement for organized religion and the government.

> Purposeful corporations have a critical role – and opportunity – in society today. As the authority of organized religion and government is diminished, the corporation – the interpersonal network committed to some mission in the service of customers, employees, shareholders and publics – becomes a more prominent building block of society (p.5).

The third section of the book, *Spreading the Gospel of Team Go*als, talks about creating *inner quality management* with workers caring for self like they care for the organization's customers.

Soul helps you discover your purpose; purpose becomes an expression of soul; soul is contact with authenticity. Resonance mean it's all sort of self-fulfilling. It feeds on itself, gets bigger and stronger and richer and fuller, and; ultimately becomes a way of life – for you, your family, your organization and society (p. 53).

In Search of the Soul of HRD by Kahnweiler and Otte (1997) is a dialogue between two HRD professionals about the need for personal and professional values to bring greater clarification of the beliefs of the field. The authors equate *soul* with *myth* as a form of story telling that gives a sense of awe, presents an image of the universe, supports a social order, and "initiate[s] individuals into the order of realities of their own psyches" (p. 171). Soul is "the life force of the individual" (p. 173). Moving back and forth between HRD as a field and their role as helpers to individual workers, the authors "want to discover the myths capable of energizing and directing the field of HRD for the good of humanity and the earth" (p. 174). Recognizing the harmful affects of HRD in service to the unethical and materialists, they focus on the spiritual experience of connectedness and the chance to help workers find fulfillment at work.

Religious, Theological, and Etymological Grounding of Spirituality

The preceding analysis has shown that because of it's disconnection from religious moorings, spirituality in management and HRD literatures lacks the moral and ethical foundations that we think are so desperately needed, not just in the workplace but in society as a whole. As Harvey Cox (1999) notes, "The lexicon of *The Wall Street Journal* and the business sections of *Time* and *Newsweek* turned out to bear a striking resemblance to Genesis, the Epistle to the Romans, and Saint Augustine's City of God" (p. 18). The theology of business portrays the meaning of human history as creation of wealth, sins as statism and regulations and salvation through free markets. The God of this new theology is The Market. Like the process theology of Alfred North Whitehead, "econologians'" of The Market attribute dislocations and pain to the transition to a free market. While markets are not a recent invention, over the past two centuries market has a new status, ". . . becoming more like the Yahweh of the Old Testament – not just one superior deity contending with others but the Supreme Deity, the only true God, whose reign must now be universally accepted and who allows for no rivals" (p. 20). Reality is defined by The Market in it's divine capacity, with ". . .[the] human body . . . [becoming a] . . . sacred vessel to be converted into a commodity" (p. 20), a reverse transubstantiation.

Failure to link the concept of spirituality to the broader socio-economic context leaves us open to exploitation, to the use and manipulation of spirituality by a system and it's aristocracy for their own purposes. Finding little *truths* within management literature bogs us down in the minutia of our daily existence, less able to step back and understand the meaning of work as it is played out in the global marketplace. As we complain about our search for meaning within a supposedly meaningless work environment, we put on blinders so we do not have to deal with the vast majority of the world's population surviving on little or no work. Within this context *god talk* is a tool used for economic and marketing purposes. By failing to understand the rhetoric and power at play, the ideology of this *god talk* is used as deflection, turning our focus inward toward our own self-development, wants and needs, while pushing us to lend our expertise to continually increase bottom-line profitability for the benefit of the few at the top. Words are taken to mean one thing within the context of our spiritual lives while at the same time turning them into a commodity for use in the marketplace.

One of the more astounding aspects of our research on spirituality is the absence in the literature of any attempt to uncover the historical or etymological definitions and understandings

of spirituality. We deem it necessary to explore substantive definitions. Webster's (2001) defines spirituality as ". . . the quality or fact of being spiritual; incorporeal immaterial nature; predominately spiritual character as shown in thought, life, etc.; spiritual tendency or tone; first surfaced (as an English word) between 1375-1425" (p. 1840). Coming from a Christian perspective, we next went to the Bible where the term *spirituality* is not found. The closest word is the adjective *spiritual* (Greek *pneumatikos*) or the adverb *spiritually* (Greek *pneumatikos*). According to Vine (1966), spiritual "always connotes the ideas of invisibility and of power" (p. 64). Spirituality, spiritual, and spiritually come from the root word *spirit* (Greek *pneuma*). In the Bible spirit occurs nearly 500 times. Spirit "primarily denotes the wind; also breath; then, especially the spirit, which, like the wind, is invisible, immaterial and powerful" (Vine, 1996, p. 62). According to Schweizer (1968) spirit ". . . means the elemental natural and vital force which, matter and process in one, acts as a stream of air in the blowing of the wind and the inhaling and exhaling of breath" (p. 334-5). Based on these definitions and our findings, we asked ourselves, where does God or any mention of a Higher Power enter into the discourse surrounding spirituality in the workplace?

Spirituality and Adult Education

No doubt a large segment of adult educators react to the co-opting of the term spirituality with distain. Smug in intellectual piety and with the fervor of an amen corner in a Southern Baptist church, such abuses are summarily blamed on the propensity of a capitalistic society to commodify anything and everything. But what we realized was that by our own failure as a field to ground these discussions within the historical, cultural and religious framework—not just of Christianity but across the scope of the religious landscape—we as adult educators have become culpable in the cooptation and commodification of the spiritual within the marketplace.

For example in their recent book on spirituality, English and Gillen (2000) purport to address the spiritual dimensions of adult learning. However, what they actually deliver is a decontextualized notion of spirituality that in effect confuses more than it addresses.

> So, how is spirituality conceptualized in this book? We, the editors, describe it as awareness of something greater than ourselves, a sense that we are connected to all human beings and to all of creation. Simply put, authentic spirituality moves one outward to others as an expression of one's spiritual experiences . . . therefore this book is located in what Berry refers to as public spirituality or in what Van Ness refers to as secular spirituality (pp. 1-2).

This type of nebulous, vague description seems to be an attempt to have spirituality mean all things to all people, excusing it as "hard to define" or describing it in purely individualistic terms with the etymology of the concept completely ignored. For example Tisdell (2000) states:

> In sum, *spirituality* is an elusive term and an elusive concept, but perhaps this is so because it is all encompassing and cannot be torn from other aspects of one's life, including one's cultural experience, one's further development, or one's social change work in the world . . . it is difficult to discuss what is so elusive and at the same time so personal and so encompassing [about it] (p. 333).

With this effort to construct what we perceive to be a "one-size-fits-all," non-offensive notion of spirituality, these authors seems to distance their definition of the concept from its religious moorings, virtually ignoring in their literature review the rich theological traditions (not to mention the preponderance of religious writings) from which the concept originated. This type of decontextualization that fails to understand notions of the sacred implicit in the term may

make the concept of spirituality more palatable to a wider readership, but it also serves to eviscerate the term, leaving it with no real meaning. Finally, as this study has shown, it also makes it much easier for the term to be co-opted, commodified, and misused for purposes that, in our view, are anything but *spiritual*.

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