

## "Religion and Business – The Critical Role of Religious Traditions in Management Education"\*

Edwin M. Epstein

**ABSTRACT.** During the past decade many individuals have sought to create a connection between their work *persona* and their religious/spiritual *persona*. Management education has a legitimate role to play in introducing teachings drawn from our religious traditions into business ethics and other courses. Thereby, we can help prepare students to consider the possibility that business endeavors, spirituality and religious commitment can be inextricable parts of a coherent life.

### Introduction

In his classic 1965 study, *The Secular City*, theologian/sociologist Harvey Cox noted three enormous impacts of the twin phenomena of urbanization and secularization on work

- The separation of the place of work from the place of residence

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Edwin M. Epstein is the former Earl W. Smith Professor and Dean at the School of Economics and Business Administration, Saint Mary's College of California. Noted internationally for his efforts to infuse ethical inquiry and social/political analysis into management education, Professor Epstein has published numerous works relating to business ethics, corporate political activity, and the corporate social policy process. His book *The Corporation in American Politics* (Prentice Hall, 1969) won the Best Book Award from the Social Issues in Management Division of the Academy of Management. A Professor Emeritus at the Haas School of Business at the University of California at Berkeley, Professor Epstein is Past Chair of the Social Issues in Management Division of the Academy of Management, and he is a founding member of the International Society for Business and Society.

- The transformation of work into increasingly bureaucratic patterns of organization
- The emancipation of work from the religious character it had retained from the period when it was interpreted as a spiritual discipline

(Cox, 1965, p. 167)

Given the theme of this conference, "At Our Best: Moral Lives in a Moral Community," I shall focus my attention on Cox's third point, the emancipation of work from its religious/spiritual context, with but brief reference to his first two insights.

Writing at the dawn of the computer era, Cox could not anticipate the profound effect that sophisticated information technology would have in reuniting workplace and residence. Californians in the heart of the Silicon Valley, are familiar with the phenomenon of home offices, virtual workplaces and the emergence of technology related "cottage industries." Work is where the computer is. Indeed, a particularly vexing problem of post-modern times is the inability for many persons to separate the world of work from other realms of life as a result of the instantaneous and ubiquitous nature of contemporary communications – we are accessible 24/7. To be sure, the reunification of workplace and residence does not impact all workers or every sector of our global economy. Nonetheless, it has become an ever-increasing aspect of contemporary life. We are, to use Eric Fromm's phrase, able to "Escape from [the] Freedom" (Fromm) of leisure.

Cox's second point highlighted the transformation of work into increasingly bureaucratic patterns of organization. Remember that Cox



was observing society – particularly American society – in the immediate aftermath of a decade which had seen the publication of such works as C. Wright Mills, *White Collar* (Mills), William Whyte's *The Organization Man* (White); David Riesman's *Lonely Crowd* (Riesman) and Sloan Wilson's *Man in the Grey Flannel Suit* (Wilson), not to mention George Orwell's, futuristic political statement, *1984* (Orwell). Man and Organization; Man versus Organization, Organization versus Man were, indeed, issues of the day. (During the 1950s and early 1960s, women were, regrettably, viewed as non-entities so far as the world of organization was concerned.) Although Cox's observations regarding individuals and organizations retain some validity, they too have been impacted by information technology. "Knowledge workers," functioning as itinerant, short-term project oriented consultants lack the organizational connection and commitment with which Cox was familiar in the 1960s. Rather than Hewlett-Packard for life, for this cadre of the work force, it was HP last year, Oracle today, and Cisco in 2002. The reciprocal, of course is the old time so-called "social contract" between organizations and their workers of lifetime employment for decent performance – albeit frequently honored in the breach – has been replaced in many spheres of work by a strictly transactional approach. Contract has replaced covenant in the relationship of individuals to organizations in the 21st century New Economy.

Both of these phenomena as well as the monumental changes which have occurred in the workplace in the thirty-six years since *The Secular City* appeared have had important implications for Cox's third point – the emancipation of the connectiveness, between work, and its religious character and role as a spiritual discipline. It is to this third theme, and more specifically, as it relates to the role of management education in preparing people for the world of work that I now turn.

### The "emancipation" of work from religion and spirituality

Revisiting Cox's work with the twenty-twenty hindsight of nearly four decades, I must confess that I find his point about the lack of connectiveness between work and its religious/spiritual under-pinnings somewhat off the mark. Indeed, what has been striking during the past decade is the palpable effort by many individuals to construct, or better still, reconstruct a nexus between their work *persona* and their religious/spiritual *persona*. I shall put aside the thorny issue of the relationship and distinctions between religion and spirituality for another day. Suffice it is to say that whether they term it spiritual or religious, women and men are seeking to find meaning in earning their daily bread above and beyond financial compensation earned and enhancing the power and profitability of good old Colossal Corp. What are some of the indicators of this phenomenon?

- The rise of prayer or study groups, frequently in work settings, where persons gather to observe the rituals or discuss the teachings of a particular faith tradition or, at times, of various faith traditions, or to have periods of meditation or other spiritual experience. (Conlin)
- The emergence of business firms which, as documented in studies by such scholars as (Joanne B. Ciulla (Ciulla)), Laura Nash (Nash), and Moses Pava (Pava) and by the behavior of corporate leaders such as Tom Chappell of Chappell of Maine, Max DePree of Herman-Miller and Aaron Feuerstein of Malden Mills who seek to operate in accordance with religious values.
- The increasing willingness, even enthusiasm of public figures to celebrate their faith commitments. Witness the behavior of the presidential and vice-presidential candidates during the 2000 election campaign.
- The expanding management literature regarding the role of spirituality and faith traditions and the associated introduction of courses on Management and Spirituality, the Management of Spirituality and the

Spirituality of Management within Graduate Business programs. Andre Delbecq (Delbecq) and Ian Mitroff (Mitroff) have been at the forefront of such endeavors.

- The attention, almost adulation, accorded Aaron Feuerstein for rebuilding Malden Mills and retaining staff on payroll during the rebuilding process, acts motivated at least in part by Feuerstein's religious commitments as an Orthodox Jew. (Goldberg)
- Writers in the business ethics area have abandoned their hitherto timid approach to acknowledging the important role of faith based ethical systems and have begun emphasizing the contributions of these religious traditions in providing frameworks for ethical business behavior. (See e.g. Herman and Schaefer).
- Finally, within the Academy of Management, scholars have established an interest group, on Management, Spirituality and Religion to stimulate and provide a venue for serious scholarly research and teaching about M+S+R.

In a recent article in *The Wilson Quarterly*, "Two Concepts of Secularism," historian Wilfred M. McClay explores the delicious paradox that

The vanguard nation of technological and social innovation is also the developed world's principal bastion of religious faith and practice. (McClay, 2000, p. 54)

He debunks a narrow notion of secularization cum modernization "which dismisses the possibility of a transcendent realm of being" and notes

Yet the world at the dawn of the 21st century remains energetically, even manically, religious, in ways large and small. And if the "secularization theory" long promoted by social-scientific students of religion has in fact been discredited, the unanticipated resiliency of religious faith in 20th century America may well be the single most arresting demonstration of the theory's inadequacy. (McClay, 2000, p. 55)

McClay observes that the concept of a federally-imposed (religiously) naked public square has

become far less popular within the United States, and not only among the Religious Right.

[T]here is a growing sense that religion may be an indispensable force for the upholding of human dignity and moral order in a world dominated by voracious state bureaucracies and sprawling transnational corporations that are neither effectively accountable to national law nor effectively answerable to well-established codes of behavior. (McClay, 2000, p. 56)

McClay's insights are interesting and important for those of us concerned with management education and the appropriateness of introducing concepts and materials drawn from religious sources into the conversation of teaching and learning which takes place in our schools of business management. In earlier papers and presentations, I have made my position that religiously based concepts and materials can make a substantial contribution to business ethics and other courses abundantly clear (See e.g. Epstein).

### Religion and academic freedom

Significantly, the January–February 2001 issue of *Academe*, the Bulletin of the American Association of University Professors (AAUP) is devoted to "Religion and the Academy." This compendium contains articles by authors from diverse religiously-affiliated colleges and universities including Calvin College (Christian Reformed Church), Yeshiva University (Orthodox Jewish), Luther College (Lutheran), University of St. Thomas (Roman Catholic) and Notre Dame University (Roman Catholic). Particularly intriguing is the strong consensus among the contributors that the sectarian character of their institutions does not constitute a constraint of their individual academic freedom and they were able to reconcile their strongly felt commitments to both their faith traditions and academic freedom. To be sure, Catholic scholar Richard McBrien of Notre Dame University, decries the requirement in *Ex Corde Ecclesiae* that professors of theology at Catholic colleges and universities obtain a mandate (i.e. an ecclesiastical license) from a competent theological

authority, but noted that he expected this requirement to have very limited impact on American Catholic institutions (McBrien).

A common theme among the authors was that as long as faculty and students were free to teach and learn outside of any doctrinal box the academic freedom and integrity of the institution were maintained. Indeed, Nicholas Wolterstorff, Noah Porter Professor of Philosophical Theology at Yale University, puts an interesting twist on the relationship of institutional religious sponsorship and academic freedom. He writes

This striking vitality and variety in the private educational sector, together with the fact that we have in a liberal democratic society (in which the state must refrain from inducting its citizens into any comprehensive perspective on God and the good) means that there is nothing an academic is free to teach in the public educational sector that she is not free to teach *somewhere* (emphasis added) in the private educational sector. But the converse is not true: there are many things an academic in this country is free to teach somewhere in the private educational sector, she is not free to teach in the public sector. (Wolterstorff, 2001, p. 20).

He concludes

There is, in this respect, a great deal more academic freedom in the private sector of the American educational system than there is in the public sector. (Ibid.)

The key word, of course, is "somewhere." From my experiences over nearly forty years at a large public research institution, large private research institution and a relatively small Catholic comprehensive institution, I am a trifle less sanguine about the relative states of academic freedom among the three than is Wolterstorff. He does, however, make a valuable point – a point which goes to the heart of my thesis about the importance of introducing into management education in appropriate courses and contexts the teachings of our faith traditions.

The introduction of ethical insights drawn from these traditions into pertinent parts of the curricula has much to offer to management education if presented for purposes of intellec-

tual illumination and not indoctrination. Scriptural sources and their off-shoots such as Catholic Social Teaching, Talmudic and Rabbinical commentaries, and the contributions of Protestant Theologians, and their analogues from other western and eastern faith traditions have a legitimate place in the curriculum if introduced to enrich but not dictate the analysis of how we identify and implement what constitutes ethical business behavior.

I recognize that in the United States where separation of Church and State is an underlying principal of American democracy, inclusion of religiously based consideration in the educational realm is considered by some academics to be somewhat suspect. The fear exists, not without cause, that exposing students to religiously based ethical teachings can turn into heavy-handed sectarian proselytization, inimitable to academic freedom. This situation prevails in some countries today where religious authorities have dominated the educational scene. I submit, however, the risk in the United States and other democratic societies is no greater than is the risk associated with such ideologies such as Marxism, Free Enterprise Capitalism, and the like where, at different times and places, indoctrination in rather than exploration of these "secular religions" has occurred.

Indeed, the introduction of religiously based concepts of ethical action provides alternative paradigms for evaluating the meaning and methods of business behavior. In a recently published article, "Recovering Religion's Prophetic Voice for Business Ethics," Martin Calkins, S. J., makes an important point regarding the important contributions that our religious teachings make to business ethics. He notes that religions offer a distinctive approach to moral reasoning that differs from philosophical ethics in two key ways.

First, religious ethics does not emphasize reason, voluntarism, individual autonomy, consequences, or rules to the extent that modern and contemporary philosophical ethics do . . . The religious ethic proposes that faith works in harmony with human reason to pursue the ideals of love and sense to others. Second, religious ethics maintains a



distinctive worldview or end (Calkins, 2000, p. 347)

derived from Scripture or other foundational sources, which articulate precepts and narratives that guide human action and bring about certain consequences.

### Religious teachings, management practice and business ethics

In her sweeping study, *Jerusalem: One City, Three Faiths* (Armstrong), Karen Armstrong notes

All the great religions insist that the test of true spirituality is practical compassion. The Buddha once said that after experiencing enlightenment, a man must leave the mountaintop and return to the marketplace and there practice compassion for all living beings. (Armstrong, 1996, p. xxi)

Throughout its history, Judaism has emphasized that true spirituality is practical compassion for all human beings exercised in the marketplace of daily life. In the words of the late great Jewish sage Abraham Joshua Heschel.

The road to the sacred leads through the secular. (Dresner, 1983–1999, p. 57)

For nearly four millennia, Jewish precepts and teachings found in Torah, Talmud, Mishna and two millennia of Rabbinic writings have dealt with such matters, to use present-day terminology, as: the distribution of wealth, utilization of natural resources, organization and administration, pricing policy, fair weights and measures, interest rates, employee relations and fair labor standards, product quality, fraud and misrepresentation, and environmental standards. These teachings are germane to courses in macro and microeconomics, finance, industrial relations, marketing, accounting, organization behavior, strategy and policy, and, of course, business ethics.

Similarly, the pertinence of Catholic Social Teachings to our understanding of the moral dimensions of our contemporary global political economy is patent. CST provides a searching lens

through which to examine the ethical nature of that economy and of our business organizations and those who manage them. (See essays in Cortright). Papal Encyclicals such as *Rerum Novarum: The Condition of Labor* (Leo XIII, 1891), *Mater et Magistra: Christianity and Social Progress* (John XXIII, 1961), *Laborem Exercens: On Human Work* (John Paul II, 1981) and *Centesimus Annus: On the Hundredth Anniversary of Rerum Novarum* (John Paul II, 1991) focusing as they do on the nature of work, the dignity of labor and the human experience in industrial society contain insights basic to courses in macroeconomics, organization behavior and labor relations/human resources management. The National Conference of Catholic Bishops' pastoral letter, *Economic Justice for All: Catholic Social Teaching and the U.S. Economy* (1986) has served an important public function by highlighting themes which are fundamental to welfare economics and finance as well as the profoundly troubling matter of wealth and its distribution in contemporary society. Indeed, the *U.S. Bishops letter and Centesimus Annus* have become part of the standard curricula in Business Ethics and other courses not only in Catholic institutions but at colleges and universities throughout the United States. (The above-mentioned sources can be found in O'Brien and Shannon).

### Conclusion

Michael Novak, writing out of the Catholic tradition, reminds us forcefully that *Business as a Calling* (Novak) is an essential, even crucial way for men and women to consider their business and other professional activities as vehicles through which they can live their religious commitments and find spiritual fulfillment. If more people understood this concept and practiced it within their organizational settings, it would make for greater individual peace of mind, and even more importantly, a better world. And we as educators have an important role to play. As in the case with all proper education, management education must not limit its focus simply to *how* students will earn their livelihoods. We can help prepare students at least to consider

the possibility that they can live productive, socially useful and contributory lives where business endeavors, spirituality and religious commitment are not oxymorons but rather inextricable parts of a coherent and meaningful life. Perhaps then, we shall at least in part, contribute to a reversal of the third trend suggested by Cox and witness a reintegration of work, its religious character and role as a spiritual discipline.

### Note

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Saint Mary's College of California,  
U.S.A.  
E-mail: speeme@aol.com