

## **Business as a calling or the calling of Christians in business. How Faith makes a difference.**

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### **Abstract**

A reflection on the calling of business and the role of Christians can easily lead to two misunderstandings: either to an underestimation of the specific rationality of business, or, to an ideological misuse of Christian ideas for the justification of the status quo in the business world.

In my paper I will try to demonstrate that Christians are called to affirm a *difference* in business and that as such they become relevant as a source of moral innovation and transformation towards more humanity. It is precisely the narrative basis of their traditions that enables them to mobilize the necessary imagination for innovating moral practices in business.

### **1. The specific rationality of business and the different hermeneutic horizon of the Christian interpretation of the world**

Talking about the 'calling' of business can give the impression that one can easily merge the rationality of business with the ethico-religious language of 'vocation' or 'calling'.

This is quite problematic since the world of business and the sciences related to it (management theories, business ethics) are affected by the differentiation process of modernity.

As products of modernity, business and management are differentiated fields determined by a sort of system-immanent logic of the market in the broadest sense of the word. Even when the practice of business is understood as more than merely the art of profit making and even when one accepts that profit making is based on the more fundamental end of producing meaningful goods via the creation of work communities in which people 'work with others for the benefit of others' (cf. John Paul II, *Centesimus annus*, ch. 4), the ethical understanding of business is still driven by market pressures. Business is 'value' driven, but in real life, value is often reduced to share holder value (profit), which remains the ultimate criterion. Good practices and ethical considerations are accepted and included in daily business as far as they are necessary and efficient for the realization of the goals of profit. Multinational companies do pay attention to human rights and moral values, but in many cases only when they are so to speak coerced to do so as a result of market pressures by significant stakeholders such as NGO's with ethical agendas (Amnesty International, Greenpeace, the other-globalists etc...), ethical investment funds, religious communities engaged in shareholder activism (cf. the interfaith centre for corporate responsibility), consumer organizations etc... As soon as they can escape the market pressure via political support their ethical 'vocation' becomes extremely shallow (cf. the refusal by the Bush administration to

implement the Kyoto norms). Even business ethics as an academic discipline which pretends to guide the business community towards a more ethical behavior, cannot escape the problem of being caught in the iron cage of modern rationality.

Already more than 16 years ago Dennis McCann convincingly diagnosed that business ethics, although it has rightfully contributed to criticizing the myth of amoral business life, has enclosed itself in the same illusion as amoral business itself in so far as it has taken over the presupposition which accords this myth its plausibility and which protects it against critique, namely the belief in the typical rationality of management and the acceptance of the manipulative power that is linked to it. In other terms: business ethics does not escape from the manipulative modern rationality of which management is the expression par excellence.

Like any other sort of expert ethics business ethicists often nurtures the illusion that it possess a collection of specialized knowledge with which they can objectively and professionally solve the problems of business life, and thus can improve the praxis of management. The ethical expertise view has been defended by Th. Van Willigenburg in a dissertation on *Inside the Ethical Expert (1991)*. According to this view, an ethicist is an expert who possesses within a certain domain an amount of specialized knowledge and skills which are obtained only after thorough study and training. Aside from the ability to clarify problems and to analyze concepts and arguments, he or she is also capable, as an expert, to make use of the specific skills of moral reasoning in such a way that he or she can come to an weighing of values and norms, so that he or she can offer advice if necessary.

Taken on itself, expert ethics is a legitimate project. But in order to become the acknowledge dialogue partner of management, it has to pay a price. And this price is the acceptance of the modern presuppositions which determine the hermeneutic horizon in which management operates. In doing so the ethical experts in business are not as such capable of offering other perspectives than those determined by this hermeneutic horizon of modernity and its forms of manipulative rationality. They do not allow real innovation in moral behavior.

The acknowledgment that business can have *on itself* no other "calling" than to apply the know how of instrumental rationality does however not mean than no innovation would be possible.

Business is not only a field dominated by instrumental rationality, but also a dynamic field of human interaction. Business organizations are not only visible organizations, but also complex institutions, and this implies the possibility of change: "in our life with other people we are engaged continuously, through words and actions, in creating and recreating the institutions that make this life possible (...) We form institutions and they form us every time we engage in a conversation that matters..." (R. Bellah, *The Good Society*, p. 11-12).

As much as institutions and structures influence the individuals working on behalf of business organizations, these same individuals also interact in such a way that they permanently reshape by way of their innovative behavior the business context.

In this perspective I prefer to speak in terms of the 'calling' of people in business rather than of the calling of business itself.

It are individual persons (acting as members of a community with a different hermeneutic horizon) interacting with others who make the difference, who retell and reinterpret the story of business and who give meaning to it.

In a Christian perspective it consequently becomes interesting to raise the question: what is the 'calling' of Christians in business? Does their presence make a difference?

The answer is clearly 'yes' and this in more than one regard.

Christian life leads to a hermeneutic interruption of business since Christians are not only "citizens" of the world of business and its hermeneutic horizon, but they have also access to another horizon of interpretation which is quite different. The point is not, as McCann has suggested that they have access to an hermeneutical horizon which is "older" than the horizon of modernity with its instrumental rationality (McCann, 1986), but that it is *different*. Because Christians cultivate an hermeneutic relationship to an interpreting community and an ethos that is different than that of modernity and its forms of instrumental and managerial rationality, they are able to discover ethical and meta-ethical perspectives that can break through the dominance of this type of rationality and social organization which is coupled with it, as well as it enables them to break through the narrow angle of "problem solving" (seeking solution on the basis of the analysis of problems instead of on the basis of innovative new perspectives).

As a consequence of the creative interplay between the rational and the narrative aspect of Christian practice and thinking, the Christian community is able to introduce a sort of counter point a different interpretation in business.

An aspect of this is the introduction of another vision. This is crucial, since, as Elsbernd and Bieringer have demonstrated (2002, 157) without vision there is no transformation of life possible.

The transformation by way of vision takes place

- (i) by engaging the imagination, which can be interpreted as follows: the journey into metaphor and story moves the actors beyond classical problem solving since it enable them to disclose new worlds of meaning (and this is the source of real innovation);
- (ii) by opening ways of challenging the status quo and by offering the potential for alternatives to the present reality;
- (iii) it engages all who share the same vision in changing realities;
- (iv) vision integrates diverse components into a whole.

We will further explore what the calling of Christians in business can be on the basis of the narrative aspects of the tradition.

## **2. Although the ethos of capitalism has its roots in Christian thinking, it is not the calling of Christians to justify the market.**

Business is dominated by the capitalistic ethos which has religious roots. Does this, however, justify a simplistic use of Christian ideas for the justification of the market or as new 'window dressing' for capitalism?

Nobody will deny that there has been in one or other regard a link between Christian ethics and the emergence of the capitalist work ethic.

It is indeed one of the striking characteristics of the history of modernity that the manner in which theologians have interpreted the relationship of human beings with God has influenced the development of the cultural framework wherein modern business life could come to unfold.

Capitalist society is not only founded, as Marx claimed, on the material substrate of relations of production and means of production. It is also based on a spiritual foundation, more specifically, on a mentality generated by a certain form of religious thought. In his famous work *Protestantism and the Spirit of Capitalism*, Max Weber demonstrates that a link can be made between modern capitalism and a labor ethos rooted in the Protestant tradition of thought. In this ethos the systematic pursuit of profit goes hand in hand with methodical diligence, soberness, and a sense of individual responsibility with regard to the profession one practices.

An important first step towards this ethos was, according to Weber, Luther's translation of the text of Jesus Sirach 11:20-21: "Stand by your obligations, go on with your work until you are old, trust in the Lord and keep at your job (*Beruf*)."

In this text, Luther attributes to the word *Beruf* (vocation), which refers to a spiritual calling, the meaning of professional work. According to Luther, people must praise and serve God not by means of a contemplative life but '*in vocatione*', in the performance of the daily labor to which a person is called.

Much more influential than Lutheran theology was the Calvinistic tradition. Like Luther, Calvin attached much importance to the duty of glorifying God '*per vocationem*', by means of meticulously devoting oneself to the ordained fulfillment of one's professional tasks. In this the doctrine of predestination plays a crucial role, even though, at first sight, it does not seem to promote harder work because, according to this doctrine, a believer can absolutely not justify himself or herself by good works. The decision over a person's salvation or damnation is totally dependent on God's arbitrary and sovereign predestination, his '*decretum horribile*', that leads believers into a state of inner loneliness and uncertainty. Weber, however, has very keenly observed that Calvinistic pastoral theology has found a solution to this: The one who is chosen by God must also consider oneself as predilected, and the one who fails to do so shows a lack of trust, and therefore he or she is not in a state of grace. One must clearly bear witness of the '*certitudo salutis*' by an attitude of self-confidence and one can best externalize this by an ascetic life coupled with an industrious and, most preferably, successful professional labour. This has to be kept up in a systematic way during one's whole life. Weber described this as '*innerworldly ascetism*'. It is this systematic innerworldly ascetic way of life which has set forth, according to him, the rationalization process that determines modern economy to this day.

Weber also points out that later, in the preaching of vulgarized Calvinism, economic success (earning money) was considered to be a sign of divine predestination. In English Puritanism, moreover, much emphasis was placed on hard work as an ascetic means against the temptations of an impure life, and aversion to labour was interpreted as a sign of the absence of grace. Religious leaders were also very well aware that the Protestant work ethic did not only bring a new spirit, but also a real accumulation of capital. To put it in the words of the Methodist, John Wesley: "religion" entails "necessary thriftiness and diligence" and "that can do nothing else but bring forth wealth".

Weber's theses were criticized by a number of commentators. They have, among others, questioned the fact that he practically links the ethos of capitalism exclusively with the Protestant tradition. A thorough reading of Weber's work shows nevertheless that he certainly does not exclude influences "of a different nature". In *Wirtschaft und Gesellschaft*, he refers to the methodical organization of life in the monastic tradition and, at the same time, he emphasizes the continuity of this form of asceticism with the inner-worldly asceticism of the Calvinists. And yet the Catholic contribution, or better the contribution of pre-reformation Christianity, to the development of the modern work ethic is very much underestimated. Along with Mumford and Toynbee, one can, nevertheless, refer in this context to the influence of the 'ora et labora' of the Benedictines. This device establishes a link between monastic life and the ethos of capitalism, especially by the way of internalizing the motivation to work. According to him, "the Benedictine rule" achieved "what was never achieved by the land reforms of the Gracques or the imperial alimenta because they did not function as an operation imposed by the state from above, but rather from below by inciting the (economic) initiative of the individual through the channeling of his or her religious enthusiasm" (Toynbee, 1947, p. 226).

As to whether the proponents of the Catholic or those of the Protestant thesis are right, we leave that aside for now. Neither do we intend to comment on the historical correctness of Weber's interpretation in itself. His thesis, however, remains important in so far as it demonstrates that there can be a link between theological views and the development of the modern economic mentality. For Weber, this link was in fact no more than a scientific hypothesis, or, to put it more precisely, only a careful affirmation of a certain affinity between Protestantism and capitalism. After Weber, however, this point of view has evolved into a legitimation theory wherein theological views are considered as means of justifying or supporting capitalism. How could it have come to this?

According to Oliver Williams, an important step towards the ideologizing of the Weberian thesis was made by Daniel Bell, a typical representative of the present-day neo-conservative culture criticism in the United States (Williams, 1982, p. 9). In the *Cultural Contradictions of Capitalism* (1976), Bell states that business life has come to a deep moral crisis. According to him, the true cause of this crisis is not the failure of the economic system, but the breakdown of the religious frame of reference within which the ethos of business life was originally embedded. In this regard Bell associates himself with the warning that Weber had already issued himself at the end of his essay on Protestantism, namely that when the inner-worldly asceticism is alienated from its religious roots, only a secular utilitarianism and materialism is left. Through the dissolution of the religious background, materialism, originally nothing more than a "light cloak that could be taken off at any moment", was changed into an "iron cage". And Weber adds: "When capitalism reaches its highest development, the pursuit of profit, devoid of any religious and ethical significance, becomes associated with pure mundane passions, through which it not seldom acquires the character of a sports event: earning money in itself becomes a performance; and to earn even more means: to extend the limits of achievement". In this way, a culture arises of "specialists without a soul; sensualists without a heart; this nullity makes itself believe it has attained a stage of civilization never attained before".

From the conclusion of Weber and Bell, that the disappearance of the original theological frame of reference leads to a rude materialism, a further step towards a theological justification is not large. Henceforth, it was claimed that the crisis of the capitalist ethos had to be averted by restoring its theological foundations. In this way, theology became a 'useful' science for economics. With that, a remarkable development arose. Not only did the American business community begin to support, especially in Latin America, the radically Calvinist church communities and sects. At the same time, it also directed its attention to Catholic social ethics and theology. This shift is evidenced in a symptomatic way from the title of Novak's book which echoes Weber: *The Catholic Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* (1993)

In such books, the theory of Weber is in a way reinterpreted as a means in the struggle against any type of market unfriendly ways of thinking such as it has been the case in liberation theology. Catholic theology is used as the alternative 'hired legitimist' of capitalism. A significant example of this is the moment when Michael Novak once summoned the business community not only to remain competitive in the market, but also in what he called the 'battlefield of ideas'. In his apologetics for democratic capitalism, Novak ventured, in function thereof, into a thorough and more market economy-friendly reinterpretation of the social teaching of the Church and even of classical dogmatic concepts like the holy trinity (as model of a community which does not destroy individuality), incarnation (as model for realism), the combat against evil (as model for competition), original sin (as warning against the illusion to change society by the way of structural reforms and as legitimization for the role of self-interest), creation (as model for co-creation and economic initiative), etc...

In reinterpreting Christian dogmatic concepts and catholic social teaching, Novak sometime displays a clear lack of scientific sense for nuances. An example will suffice to demonstrate this. In a passage from *Toward a Theology of the Corporation*, where he refers to the suffering servant in Deutero Isaiah, he even turns the whole matter upside down: "For many years, one of my favorite biblical texts was Is 53,2-3: 'He had no form or majesty that we should look at him, nothing in his appearance that we should desire him. He was despised and rejected by others.' I (says Novak) would like to apply these words to modern enterprise, an incarnation of God's presence in the world that is very much disapproved of". This association of the powerless, non-violent, suffering servant with the powerful organizations of the world, the multinational companies, does not do any justice at all to the original meaning of the biblical text, and not one single fraction of its prophetic eloquence remains.

Moreover, such a concept of the role of Christian or Catholic thinking with regards to business is nothing more than an affirmation of the status quo of conventional thinking about the market in the business community. It does not really offer a new and humanizing hermeneutic horizon, since it stays within the interpretative framework of business itself. It does fail to appreciate Christianity as innovative force or as source of semantic and practical innovation and defends to unilaterally the established order (what Mounier would have called the 'established disorder', since it is in fact an order which leads to many sorts of victims).

### 3. The vocation of Christians in business: introducing really semantic and practical innovation.

A more concrete description of what the calling of Christians in business can mean elucidated from the perspective of narrative ethics (and ethic based on the reading of the bible as part of participating in a broader tradition see Verstraeten, 2000, pp. 59-77)

I point to the narrative aspect of Christian calling in business in order to avoid another misunderstanding.

A possible complaint about the specific calling of Christians could be that they want to introduce into business supererogatory principles such as “*caritas*” (that a principle is supererogatory means that it allegedly asks too much of the economic actors). This interpretation is typical for a discourse of ‘experts’ who are of the opinion that one should make a careful distinction between principles that ‘are acceptable’ within the sphere of a functionally differentiated role of responsibility and principles that do not belong within that segment of reality or that, at most, are intended for private use.

Christian principles such as Christian love are, according to them, only acceptable in private life, not in business.

This 'privatization' of the Christian *caritas* is inadequate and typical for the first misunderstanding that we have already described. It fails to take into account that Christian morality is not primarily about abstract principles, but about a practice which can be fully understood in the light of the concrete narrative contexts in which these ‘principles’ appear. Without their original narrative context, moral principles are but abstractions or skeletons.

In this regard the commandment of love is not an abstract principle, but a commandment the meaning of which only comes to full light in narratives like the parable of the good Samaritan. It is not an abstract exposition on love, but rather a narrative set within a concrete context. It grants the listener the possibility of gaining insight into what he or she should do within his or her own decision making context. The parenetic (exhortative) character of the narrative plays an important role in this (see further): the confrontation with the story is not noncommittal. The listener is offered a choice, he or she is held responsible, even for that which does not strictly belong within the domain of professional deontology.

In a certain sense, one encounters this narrative structure also in the many stories of business life itself (e.g., in the well-known success stories), wherein principles such as efficiency and efficaciousness are touched upon. But this call to imitation remains rather limited to the economic sphere.

The fact that members of the business community are confronted with stories from different narrative traditions can sometimes cause them unbearable tension. One tradition initiates them towards a praxis in agreement with the rationality of business life, whilst other traditions urge them on towards a responsibility that surpasses their specific role obligations. Thanks to this area of tension, moral actors can look at business life in a new way, from a different horizon of knowledge other than that of managerial rationality alone. Thus a familiarity with the biblical narrative tradition can actually contribute towards the creation of a space of freedom that makes it possible to make choices that are reinvigorating and more human.

Let us now explore some concrete aspects of the calling of Christians in business from the perspective of narrative ethics.

3. 1. The indirect effect of reading the bible on the transformation of Christians in business and of business by Christians.

3.1.1. The effect of the scriptures as poetic texts.

Referring to a specifically poetic 'world' the biblical text generates a metamorphosis in its readers which enables them (and their communities) to interpret their life and the world in a new light. Biblical poetry does not offer in the first place new moral norms (although some texts are explicitly normative), nor does it lead to immediate conclusions for concrete problems; rather, it puts the common morality in a new and particular perspective, that of (1) an abundant economy of grace and love (Thomasset, 1995, 459) and (2) the fundamental obligation to a merciful justice in response to the 'surabondance de la grace' (Ricoeur) than one has received from God (cf. the framing of the decalogue in a broader perspective of human liberation according to the model of God who liberates his people from the slavery of Egypt). Moral norms get a new formal meaning and ethics passes thereby from the level of formal obligation (obedience to the moral law imposed by reason) to the level of radical loving obedience (Thomasset, 1995, 326).

There is more, however. The point is that not only the formal meaning of *norms* is changed, but also the *moral life of those who read* the biblical texts. Persons who have read the texts and appropriated them imaginatively, undergo a 'metanoia', they are radically changed. In this sense one might say that the transformative biblical 'poesis' is more concerned with a *new way of being* than with new way of acting. It has more to do with an '*ethics of being*' than with 'an ethics of doing'. Precisely because the metanoia is the starting point, Christians mark a difference and it is in and through the incarnation of that difference in real business life, that they act as moral innovators. The world of business is not moved towards more humanization by way of misusing Christian concepts for the maintenance of the status quo or of the typical presuppositions of the business community, but by way of implementing new life and new practices, which at first sight are particular, but can be acknowledged as universal after they humanness has been proved by life.

An important aspect of this transformative poesis is that the biblical connection of meta-ethics and ethics is not a 'heteronomous' obstacle to freedom but an empowerment of the human capacity to act in a morally responsible way. The biblical poesis, with its perspective of an abundance of grace, transforms a human person into a *homo capax*, and this in a much broader sense than merely a *regeneration of the will, because all the creative human faculties are affected, such as, for example, the moral imagination.* (cf. Paul Ricoeur as interpreted by Thomasset, 1995, 204). The bible speaks about what God *enables* and not only about what he *requires* human persons to do under the natural, historical and social conditions in which they live.

### 3.1.2. The crucial role of biblical texts with regard to the constitution of the human person as a moral subject

Morality is not only a matter of right moral decisions and isolated acts, it concerns, in the first place, the integration of decisions and acts in a person's life as a whole (Cf. Demmer, 1991). Moral subjects bear a unique responsibility for the moral quality of the whole of their lives as persons.

The problem is that business is too much oriented towards problem solving and this is reflected in the textbooks of business ethics which refer to concrete cases which need to be 'solved'. But however meaningful this case-method may be in itself, it disregards an important, if not the most important, aspect of moral life. Morality is not only a question of particular decisions and separate acts, but also and in the first place a continuing actualization of a fundamental ethical life intention which finds its significance in a meta-ethical or religious fundamental option. The moral decisions of persons are also about what Peter Kemp calls '*a narrative configuration of true life*', the configuration of oneself as a narrative unity (1986). People also bear a unique responsibility in business life, not only for their professional choices, but also for the totality of their lives. Professional decisions which are fundamentally in contradiction with a fundamental ethical life choice will not only have negative consequences for others (which is an important element in moral judgement), but also lead to self-alienation. Managers cannot escape from the problem that their professional decisions fundamentally influence their dignity as moral subjects. That an unbearable conflict can break out between the kind of persons they want to be, and the kind of persons they actually are professionally, is beyond dispute. One does not solve this, however, by means of a cynical division of a person into a private sphere and a professional sphere. There is but one person and therefore one is responsible whether one likes it or not. In relation to this problem, the moral theologian can perhaps play a meaningful and even comforting role. On the one hand, he or she cannot do otherwise than accentuate the tension between role morality and a fundamental personal responsibility for the whole of one's life.

The unity of the human person cannot, however, be adequately understood without taking the role of narrative configuration into account. According to Mark Johnson "narrative is our most comprehensive form of synthetic understanding (...) the unity of the self and its acts is, in the broadest context, a narrative unity" (Johnson, 164). What this means and how it is related to reading the bible is explained in a masterly way by Paul Ricoeur. In his book *Soi-même comme un autre* he demonstrated that a moral subject is not merely a completely autonomous or self-sufficient identity, not only a sameness (idem-identity), but also a more dynamic identity (a self, ipse) that is configured in a permanent interaction with an otherness. This otherness is not only represented by the real otherness of the concrete other (cf. Levinas), but also the otherness of the texts (in the broad sense of the word: bible, but also liturgy or the great texts of a tradition) that enable a person to configure and re-configure himself or herself by way of an imaginary elaboration of the possibilities of being and meaning that are offered by those texts. For Ricoeur "comprendre s'est se comprendre devant le texte".

A person as interpreted 'self' is a distillation, as it were, and an imaginative elaboration of the metaphoric and poetic texts (religious texts as well as expressions of arts and culture) that he or she has experienced. With regard to the issue at hand, we can say that Christians who have developed a lively relationship with the biblical texts through reading and worshipping, are in a

relationship which does not merely provide them with moral insights, it also provides them with a narrative identity as Christian moral subjects. In other words, the texts with their manifold “plots” offer the opportunity for an imaginative appropriation of possibilities that can be transformed into meaningful patterns, not only for concrete acts (which can be interpreted as a stories with a plot) but primarily for the narrative configuration or reconfiguration of oneself as a person (Morny, 85). Such a narrative configuration or reconfiguration of the person as mediated by the bible, enables Christians to overcome both the “deflated pretensions of an essentialistic or egocentric self, on one hand, or alternately the aberration of the de-centred post-modern subject” with its total loss of structures of inner plausibility (Morny 85).

For Christians, the development of a culture of reading the bible is a necessary condition for the formation of their moral identity, an absolute must (although its is not exclusive - cf. the role of reason).

### 3.2. The more direct influence of the bible on the concrete actions of Christians.

3.2.1. First of all we must acknowledge the *parenetic character* of biblical narratives. This exhortative aspect is sometimes interpreted - as seems to be the case with Bruno Schüller - in an overly minimalist way. According to Schüller, the bible and especially the gospel does not provide us with “an adequate determination of what is morally right” since it is exhortative rather than “normative”. Exhortation in itself does not convey any new moral insights and therefore parenetic texts should be judged primarily in terms of their influence on the reader rather than in terms of their informative normativity (Schüller, 1980, 216-217).

The problem remains, however, that Schüller’s interpretation, which is a typical example of the thesis of the autonomous morality school, does insufficient justice to the radical character of biblical parenesis. In this regard Luc Anckaert’s interpretation is more in line with the bible. Taking into account the ‘ternary’ relationship of the reader with the referent of the world of the text (God), the exhortative nature of the text radicalizes human responsibility. Limited forms of human autonomy and of limited types of ‘role responsibility’ are broken open towards a more universal responsibility, even a limitedness responsibility for the whole world which is represented concretely by the face of the individual who appeals to us (L. Anckaert, 1994).

In this way, the biblical perspective introduces the difference between the role based ‘doing things right’ and ‘doing the right thing’, which is more fundamental.

Such a radical ‘universalization’ of human responsibility, to which the readers of the bible are called, is particularly relevant with respect to professional ethics. A ternary relation to the biblical texts surpasses limited and functionally differentiated ‘role-obligations’ and moves towards an ethics of real and global responsibility in which one reckons with the ‘neighbourhood-effects’ and long-term effects of professional decisions and in which one expresses a deeply human concern for the concrete victims whose tears are often disregarded by a bureaucratic or technocratic mentality.

An example are the engineers working for IBM in Nazi-Germany and maintaining the new machines allowing the Nazi’s to manage more efficiently the registration of the Jews in view of their extermination. From perspective of limited role responsibility it can be interpreted with some

goodwill as 'doing things right' (their technical support was indeed of high quality and useful) but from the perspective of the bible it was fundamentally wrong, since in the context of a broader concept of responsibility, they actively participated in making the holocaust more efficient!

Another example that shows how much a perception of reality based on faith can be relevant for business life is described by Oliver Williams (1986, 473-484) It is about the story of Mr. Hewlett, founder of Hewlett Packard, one of the most trend-setting companies in the computer science sector and, at the same time, a company characterized by a very humane management style. This manager had, in the 40s, coincidentally been personally confronted with the fact that an employee became incapacitated due to a serious disease and then landed in bitter poverty along with his family. The consequences of disease or accident to the family were obviously much worse than he could ever have imagined, surely in the American context of that time wherein social security was still practically non-existent. After this shocking experience, he resolved to work out a social business policy that was for its time with extraordinary. It included system of employment security and health insurance. This very socially moved decision was not made on grounds of denatured principles or on grounds of the generally recognized role obligations of business people at that time. What he did, actually did not fit into the usual framework. It was a groundbreaking decision which, as it were, spontaneously grew out of the contrast between his confrontation with the suffering of a concrete employee and the demands of evangelical love. His deeply rooted familiarity with the gospel stories allowed him to intuitively make an ethical choice. The Christian narrative tradition, as such, had taken possession of his deepest self so that in a new and concrete decision making context, namely that of a manager in a specific situation, he was capable of making himself a neighbour to his employees just as much as the good Samaritan did in the well-known story.

The example of Mr. Hewlett is also interesting because it shows that there is a distinction between the rational justification of a decision which usually happens afterwards and the taking of a decision on grounds of an intuitive 'seeing' or 'knowing'. Obviously, the former element is indeed likewise important because it is necessary in order to evaluate whether the given solution, objectively speaking, is the most adequate answer to the given situation. But the loving power in the taking of such a decision is at least just as important. A fundamental ethical decision is taken intuitively out of the entire personality of an actor. This brings me to a third consideration.

### 3.2.2. The role of *imagination*

In my description of the meta-ethical role of biblical 'poesis' I noted that telling and reading stories creates the possibility for the development of an imaginative space for experiments of thought in which one's moral judgement can exercise itself in an hypothetical way. Biblical imagination influences concrete acts as "first laboratories for moral judgement" (Ricoeur, 167, 200).

Indeed, ethical acting is not only a matter of an act of the will or an act of obedience to moral norms on the basis of rational insight, it is also the result of a more spontaneous and creative process in which persons are moved by a re-productive and productive imagination. Such an imagination makes it possible to develop fundamental inner dispositions and new models for action.

A least one aspect of the biblical imagination requires a special attention at this juncture: its role with regard to the imitation of Jesus Christ.

For the Christians the three sections of the Hebrew bible (Torah, Prophets and Wisdom) find their accomplishment - not, of course, their abolition - in Jesus Christ who is the ultimate Christian model and norm. Acting in the spirit is made possible by biblical imagination. Such an imagination enables Christians to look at the world and at life through his eyes ("*voir comme*") and it enables them also to discover new ways of being and new models of action ("*agir comme*"). When Christians have identified themselves imaginatively with Christ, they can transform the 'self' into a 'christomorphic self'. This has nothing to do with servile imitation or a mimesis as described by Rene Girard. What really matters here is that such Christians enter into the same type of experience as that of the first disciples who gradually discovered Christ as their 'interior master'. The moral life of Christians can not be practiced without discipleship (Thomasset, 1995, 208). This imaginatively mediated mystical 'acting as he would' leads not only to a radicalization and humanization of Christian attitudes, but also to an acceptance of the scandal of the cross and to self-sacrificing love.

This is relevant in business: in being confronted with resistance against the humanization of work, against re-balancing work and leisure, against implementing standards of justice in the market, Christians experience this negativity as a cross. Not a cross that leads to mere acceptance of facts, but of suffering because of what is not yet possible, because of what does not go into the direction of the Kingdom announced by Christ. In taking up this cross one inserts oneself in the process of redemption and liberation of the world.

At this level of the imitation of Christ, the heart of the christomorphic self can have reasons that secular reason can not yet easily understand. This does not mean, however, that the mystic-ethical imitation of Christ must be irrational. A deeper reflection on the meaning of a life that accepts the scandal of the cross can lead to a deeper understanding of the mystery of the person and of his or her universal nature "under the conditions of a kenotic existence" (Demmer, 1995, 42). To put it in the words of Hans Urs von Balthasar: "Christ is the categorical imperative in concrete form, insofar as (...) by his suffering (...) he empowers us in our inner self to do the Father's will along with him (cum ipso)" (Schüller, 1980, 218).

Accepting the cross also requires that we open ourselves to the concrete suffering of others, the immediate others as well as the distant others who can or do become victims of professional or institutional decisions.

Leaders in business should open themselves to the suffering of the victims of history. So, instead of focusing unilaterally on the success stories of business, they must also look at the consequences of decisions for those who are often unjustly considered as losers, or for those who are victimized by well-intended profit-oriented decisions.

### 3.3. The universal meaning of the calling of Christians in business.

In modern and post-modern political and social ethics there is a tendency to privatize religious perspectives, norms commitments and practices or to accept it consider them only on the condition that they can be understood as a comprehensive moral theory which needs to be 'thinned out' into

abstract universal procedures and principles (cf. J. Rawls) in order to be publicly acceptable and relevant.

This opinion is symptomatic of an un-historical conception of moral norms. What is accepted or acceptable, at a given moment in history, as universal moral reference framework for public life, is not merely the product of a synchronic consensus, but also, and in equal measure, the result of a permanent process in which generally accepted norms are broadened and enriched by moral convictions and by the moral practice of particular narrative and rational traditions. Many norms or customs that we accept today as 'universal' are the historical product of a complex process of inculturation upon which the Judeo-Christian, and thus biblical, moral tradition had a humanizing influence (cf. Demmer, 1995, 41). In this context one can say that biblical-semantic and practical innovation, translated into well-considered convictions and justified praxis, will continually contribute to a substantial enrichment of public debate and to a public ethos which is expressed in a more substantial way than merely by formal rules and procedures, a public ethos in which substantial public virtues are cultivated (e.g. a real sense of justice and solidarity).

One can illustrate the relevance of the dialectic between the specifically biblical and the universal aspects of ethics by way of a hermeneutic of the 'golden rule' in light of a dialectic of love and law.

At first sight there is a clear difference between biblical love and the deontological rule of reciprocity. Even the language-form is different: poetic, hymnic, metaphoric language as opposed to prosaic and procedural language. There is also a tension between the logic of abundance (love your enemy) and the well-balanced logic of proportion (golden rule). Inspired by Ricoeur, Thomasset states that this difference should not be interpreted as a separation. The golden rule has always a double meaning. It can be the expression of a kind of enlightened self-interest or a utilitarian calculus (*do ut des* as a sort of market logic), but it can also be understood from a perspective that transcends self-interest. In this way it becomes an expression of the economy of grace. Both aspects influence each other: the commandment of love brings the golden rule to generosity and the golden rule protects the logic of love against chaotic adventures while still allowing love to be incarnated in social life. In this sense the dialectic the generally accepted rule of reciprocity becomes a mediator of love, and love becomes an inspirator of business rules (cf. Thomasset, 1995, 463). It introduces in a world of scarcity (economy) the logic of abundance.

This socially relevant dialectic brings me to a last reflection on the influence of biblical poesis on business. The semantic richness of the world of the bible, with its potential to generate a new imagination, is not only relevant for the members of Christian churches, but also for the whole of society. The biblical world makes it possible to rediscover paradigm-changing root-metaphors, new perspectives for a better understanding of our time. These root-metaphors enable society to live with paradoxes once again (cf. Handy, 1994). They bring self-interest and the mechanism of the invisible hand in tension with the perspective of solidarity and the invisible handshake. They humanize contracts by the commitment of a social covenant. They orient people to a common good, but not without a preferential option for the poor, and they enable individuals to break through the closed horizon of a one-dimensional technocratic and economist culture. In short, the

metaphors offered by the bible can enable society to de-mythologize and overcome its ideological distortions (Verstraeten, 1994).

It is not by pure coincidence that the paradigm-changing force of the biblical imagination is particularly valorised in the report of the World Governance Commission on new values for a globalised world (Our Global Neighbourhood, 1995).

Using the words of Barbara Ward the document writes: “the most important change that people can make is to change their way of looking at the world. We can change studies, jobs, neighbourhoods, even countries and continents, and still remain much as we always were. But change our fundamental angle of vision and everything changes - our priorities, our values, our judgements, our pursuits. Again and again in the history of religion, this total upheaval in the imagination has marked the beginning of a new life (...) a turning of the heart, a metanoia, by which men (sic) see with new eyes and understand with new minds and turn their energies to new ways of living.”

In dialogue with other traditions, the biblical, meta-ethical poesis is indeed capable of changing the world of business and to make it conscious of the unique calling of its constituents to humanize the world.

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