

# Can We Conceive a Management Spirituality without Faith?

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**ABSTRACT:** This paper argues that it is possible to conceive of spirituality outside the context of any particular faith tradition. However, such a spirituality is necessarily impoverished and inferior to those conceived within the context of a healthy religious tradition. Further, the role of management with respect to spirituality is explored and the argument made that managers have a duty to protect spiritual goods for their employees, but not necessarily a duty to insure their development.

*Just as human activity proceeds from man, so it is ordered toward man. For when a man works he not only alters things and society, he develops himself as well. He learns much, he cultivates his resources, he goes outside of himself and beyond himself. Rightly understood, this kind of growth is of greater value than any external riches which can be garnered . . . . Hence, the norm of human activity is this: that in accord with the divine plan and will, it should harmonize with the genuine good of the human race, and allow people as individuals and as members of society to pursue their total vocation and fulfill it.*

*Second Vatican Council  
Gaudium et spes 35*

The question of what role spirituality ought to play in the contemporary workplace is a puzzling one. In attempting to address it we seem to be caught on the horns of a dilemma. On the one hand, spirituality seems to be closely tied up with faith commitments and religious practices. In pluralistic societies one hardly knows how to create space for spirituality in organizations without opening the door for conflict between employees. It seems better to sanitize the workplace and avoid the problem altogether. On the other hand, many organizations recognize the hunger for a spiritual dimension in the lives of their employees and experience the pressure to create some outlet for that yearning. Can this be done in a way that avoids imposing a certain set of beliefs and is respectful of everyone's views, including those who do not wish to participate? Or would any such

effort be so bland and sterile as to trivialize spirituality and offend every employee while benefiting no one? The problem becomes even more acute for managers who themselves have deep faith commitments that shape their lives. Must they compartmentalize their lives or can they find appropriate ways to integrate faith and career?

The purpose of this paper is not to offer a set of concrete guidelines and exercises for managing spirituality at work, but rather to suggest a framework within which spirituality and its relevance to business organizations might be understood and to offer an answer to the question of whether spirituality can be effectively detached from a faith tradition. In order to address these questions, it will be helpful to consider what spirituality might mean in a philosophical context rather than a theological one.

### A Theory of Human Fulfillment

Over the past two decades or more two philosophers, Germain Grisez and John Finnis, have articulated a restatement of classical moral philosophy that will give us the conceptual tools we need to understand what spirituality is in abstraction from any religious tradition. To be sure, both Grisez and Finnis are deeply committed Catholics, but their moral philosophy, while compatible with Christian moral theology, is not derived from or dependent upon it. In fact, it will allow us to understand how non-Christian traditions and practices may be authentically called spiritualities.

At the heart of their theory is the notion of *integral human fulfillment*. Human persons, they argue, naturally seek and find fulfillment in the possession of a set of *basic goods*. These basic goods correspond to the richness of human nature and cannot be reduced to one another, nor is any one category of basic goods merely an instrument for the possession of another. As a consequence, genuine human fulfillment consists in the integrated possession of the basic goods, and the moral life is the practical pursuit of these goods in ways that permit persons to remain open to each.

Grisez and Finnis divide the basic goods into two sets. One set consists of goods that we may share or participate in, to some degree, without making a deliberate choice to pursue them. These include the good of life and health, the good of knowledge and beauty, and the good of excellence in work and play. At least initially, every human being experiences these goods as received from others and not deliberately chosen and pursued.

The second set consists of goods that are possessed only as a result of deliberate choice and pursuit, that is, self-determining action. These goods all entail harmony of some sort and the avoidance or overcoming of conflict and alienation. They include what Grisez and Finnis call the good of personal integrity or self-integration, which is a harmony within the person, a resolution of the inner urges and tensions that cause conflict within the self. A second good in this category is practical reasonableness or authenticity, which is harmony between knowledge, will, and action. A third is harmony between persons, or friendship, and the fourth and final good in this set is religion, or harmony between the person and the Creator, the source of his being.

I submit that we may understand spirituality, in the broadest sense, *to be the pursuit of harmony in oneself and in one's relationships with others*. To put it another way, while the goal of a truly good human life is integral human fulfillment (the integrated presence of each category of the basic goods in a person's life), spirituality particularly concerns the second set of basic goods. Moreover, where spirituality constitutes a plan or a set of practices for realizing and integrating these goods in one's life, it is good or bad to the degree that it is (1) fully oriented to the truth about human persons and extra-human realities, and (2) realistic in its prescriptions for successfully bringing people to genuine fulfillment.

Spirituality, then, may be conceived in a meaningful way in abstraction from any specific religious tradition. Ignatian spirituality, Hindu spirituality, Scientology, animism, witchcraft, and voodoo all offer some plan for achieving human fulfillment. Nevertheless, they are not equally good spiritualities, and because the ways to go wrong in this area are so many, something else is required to ensure that the two criteria just mentioned are adequately fulfilled.

### Misguided Spirituality and the Role of Religion

The pursuit of basic goods in the second set, by definition, must be deliberate, and, as we know from experience, is never easy. There are too many ways to go off track, three of which distractions merit some further attention.

The pursuit of spiritual goods involves a sort of paradox. The first category of basic goods we discussed is defined by our ability to possess them without deliberate pursuit. We receive life (and usually health) from our parents and take it as a given. When we are young we believe that we are immortal and invulnerable. At first, we soak up knowledge and appreciate pretty things without effort and only later, when we are in school, do we need to discipline ourselves to study and to cultivate our tastes. At the same time we take pleasure in the things we do well naturally, as a result of the talents we have inherited, but it requires maturity to develop the skills that we need where we lack talent.

The paradox is that while these goods are first experienced as received from others, in some sense, we do not initially require others to possess them. We possess them without serious effort, and so no help or training is required. On the other hand, the basic goods of the second set (which we might call spiritual goods), cannot be received from others. We must cultivate them as a matter of choice. Nevertheless, we probably cannot do so very well unless others show us how. Despite his furious protests to the contrary, the adolescent needs the guidance, direction, and discipline of his parents in order to resolve his inner conflicts and to learn how to form friendships and to live in harmony with others. Unless we learn from others that there is more to life than the first set of basic goods, we are too often willing to settle for pleasures and material possessions to the virtual exclusion of the other goods. Paradoxically, while we can possess the spiritual goods only through our own deliberate actions, we can probably not pursue them successfully without others.

A second distraction concerns what we might call the emotional companions of genuine fulfillment. We are quite capable of accepting an emotional satisfaction in place of what is really fulfilling. For example, it is usually a pleasure to be honored or complimented as a result of someone's recognition of our accomplishments. Some people, though, are quite content to pursue honor without the accomplishment. A sense of peace rightly accompanies the achievement of real self-integration, but this sense of peace (or its surrogate) can be induced in the absence of self-integration by other means, such as drugs and self-deception. Or we might be content to accept a sort of superficial sociability as a substitute for the effort of maintaining real friendships. In its worst manifestations, this distraction causes people to reject real goods in favor of mere emotional companions when the real goods do not generate the same emotional experience. It was with this in mind that Cicero warned his son always to prefer being worthy of honor without recognition than to be honored without merit.

A third distraction is related and involves self-deception. We may achieve a kind of harmony either by conforming ourselves to the truth or by reconceiving reality to conform it to ourselves. In either case we resolve an inner conflict. To give a simple example, a friend may need our assistance at a very inconvenient time, and this request creates a conflict. We may resolve the conflict either by honoring the reality of our friendship and giving the required help whether convenient or not, or by deciding that he is not a real friend after all and so does not deserve our help. While both options resolve the conflict (at some level) only one respects the truth about the relationship. We could think of many other examples along the same lines. In the context of spirituality, though, the most prominent example has to do with a person's relationship with God. The conflict created by sin can either be resolved by repentance and reform or by the denial of sinfulness, or even of God's very existence.

These distractions are worth considering because they, and others like them, are very real problems for a spirituality abstracted from a faith tradition. At the very least, a spirituality rooted in a faith tradition provides a tested plan for pursuing the spiritual goods and a counter-balance to the temptations to accept substitutes and engage in self-deception. It provides a benchmark, a measure of authenticity that is supported by the successful experience of numerous predecessors.

And some religious traditions—most notably Judaism and Christianity—can go one step further and claim an authority superior to collective experience: revelation. While we can construct a spirituality of sorts quite in abstraction from any religious tradition (and the last two centuries have certainly seen many constructed *ex nihilo*), Judaism and Christianity—if their claim to possess revelation is true—constitute a far superior basis for spirituality than any other. In such a case, as fallen creatures subject to misdirection, self-deception, emotional intoxication, and the like, it would be thoroughly irrational for us to prefer an artificially constructed spirituality to one based on authentic revelation. To reject authentic revelation is to prefer the "puzzling images" of which Paul spoke to the Corinthians.

### Spirituality and Management

This might suggest that a Christian manager or, for that matter, any manager whose life is formed by a faith commitment, should attempt to shape the workplace according to the insights of his faith. After all, if revelation is a superior guide to human fulfillment, does a manager not have a duty to use it to benefit his employees? To some degree, if faith is well-integrated in his life, this will be inevitable, but it need not give rise to conflicts.

The relevance of spirituality for management and the workplace depends upon the recognition that persons are fulfilled by both sets of basic goods. In other words, while they are genuinely good and worth pursuing, there is more to a truly satisfying human life than health, knowledge, aesthetic experience, and skillful performance. At the very least, the recognition that human persons need bodily *and* spiritual goods requires management to organize work in such a way that these goods are not impeded by employment. This is a moral minimum that we have come to recognize at the level of bodily goods (safe working conditions, physical comfort, reasonable wages, etc) but often only recognize dimly at the level of spiritual goods.

The manager with a faith commitment will probably see the importance of the spiritual goods more clearly than others, but this does not mean that she ought to use the practices of her faith to organize and structure the workplace, or even to articulate the goals of the organization. The insights of her faith, however, should give rise a commitment to create an environment at work that is truly open to the realization of spiritual goods in the lives of employees and actively supports the pursuit of those goods where possible. Even so, the nature of the workplace (whether a business, a not-for-profit organization, or a unit of government) imposes some limits on what a manager should and may do.

Classical moral philosophy recognizes general three types of human associations: the family, the political community, and a rather vaguely defined intermediate category that we might call specialized associations. A crucial distinction between specialized associations and both families and political communities is that specialized associations are organized for specific, limited purposes. Families and political communities, on the other hand, by their very nature, are ordered to the comprehensive fulfillment of their members. No element of the well-being of its members truly falls outside the concern of families and political communities. With specialized associations, however, this is not the case. These voluntary associations are not formed to support the comprehensive fulfillment of their (sometimes temporary) members, but to pursue limited goals of common interest and benefit. The members of a garden club, for example, might feel sympathy for another member who is searching for a new job, but it is not the purpose of the club as such to provide employment counseling and placement services.

Similarly, a business is organized to pursue limited a set of goals that may be achieved by the collaborative efforts of the employees and managers, but the comprehensive human development of each of the collaborators is not one of these goals. Despite the rhetoric we sometimes employ, businesses are not families and managers are not parents. It may sometimes be expedient for businesses to provide certain kinds of extraordinary benefits or supports in order to make it possible for employees to continue to collaborate, but when they do so it is to make up for the failure of the family or the political community.

As a consequence, managers—even those with deeply-held faith commitments—do not have a duty, as managers, to pursue or ensure the spiritual development of their subordinates. They do, however, have a duty to make sure that the structures and activities of the workplace are not hostile to this spiritual development and, where it does not conflict with the legitimate goals of the association, might even positively support such development. In discharging this duty, the Christian manager is neither hobbled by his faith nor bound to give explicit witness. Instead, he may be assisted by his faith to see more clearly what will truly contribute to spiritual development, regardless of the faith of the employment, and be more strongly motivated to instantiate those conditions.

### Some Specific Duties for Christian Managers

Christian managers should be powerfully aware that all the persons associated with their enterprises—customers, employees, investors, creditors, and so on—are individuals beloved of God and destined for eternal life. As a result, they need to pay attention to the impact of their operations on several categories of basic goods, especially what we have called the spiritual goods.

First, managers must ensure that the work product of the members of the association serves genuine goods. The work of persons is too valuable to waste on phantom goods, or no goods at all. For example, many businesses in the developed world generate products and services that serve no real good at all (nutritionless snacks or mindless entertainment) or may even promote evil (pornography, prostitution, many kinds of weapons, or drugs, tobacco and alcohol). At best these products and services simply waste resources and at worst they corrupt consumers. Inevitably, they also demoralize the employees who produce them and who are not yet desensitized to what they are doing. Management has a duty to see to it that what an organization does genuinely promotes human well-being, no matter how mundane the good served, and that employees share in the satisfaction of this by understanding clearly just what goods are served by their work.

Second, managers must be attentive to the self-integration of employees. This may emerge in the workplace in a couple of ways. Since self-integration is the resolution of conflicting desires and inclinations within the person, a sound organization will not aggravate or exploit these inner conflicts. For example, many people experience a conflict between a desire for success in a career and family responsibilities. Managers should not aggravate this problem by forcing employees to choose between their families and their careers, or by penalizing employees who require some time or some flexibility to tend to their family responsibilities. Neither should they take advantage of a particular employee's inclination to overwork (which inclination is a result of poor self-integration), however beneficial this might be for the company. In the United States, some industries, notably computers and financial services, are notorious for their willingness to exploit employees in this way.

Third, managers must be attentive to the development of practical reasonableness, or authenticity, in employees. Among other things, this means exercising care to avoid creating a working environment in which employees are faced with conflicts between

what they are expected to do and what they think they are morally obliged not to do. This could include such acts as lying to customers or other employees, cheating customers, abusing subordinates, or even deliberately producing poor-quality products. Managers must also take care that incentive systems do not create such conflicts unintentionally.

Fourth, the workplace has the potential to be a community of a sort. Human beings, as social creatures, naturally tend to form friendships with others with whom they work. Friendship, in fact, is part of the cement that ensures effective collaboration. As a consequence, managers must be attentive to ways in which they can foster the development of the organization as a true human community, moving beyond a mere aggregation of individuals. They fail to do so when they stimulate unnecessary competition, when they exhibit favoritism to some employees, or when they politicize the workplace.

Finally, managers need to be attentive to the consequences of work and participation in the organization's activities for the employee's relationship with God. For the Christian manager, at least, this may be understood on two levels. First, each person has a vocation, a role to play in the working out of the divine plan, and a set of gifts suitable for that vocation. Managers should be attentive to the gifts displayed by employees as signs of that vocation and willing to provide resources and opportunities, as appropriate, for employees to recognize and fulfill their vocations. There are countless stories of good managers who have recognized the potential in an employee and helped her to flourish by developing that potential. There are also countless examples of managers who saw employees merely as tools to accomplish specific tasks and who thereby wasted their human resources. The history of American business is replete with examples of gifted individuals who were smothered in one organization and went on to great success in a competing organization.

A second level concerning the good of religion has to do with the practice of religion itself. As Pope John Paul has commented many times, businesses must be attentive to the religious freedom and the religious obligations of employees. This may mean permitting individuals some tasteful and appropriate display of religious commitment in the workplace, and perhaps even opportunities for individuals to pray together during the working day. It also means permitting employees to celebrate holidays and to refrain from working on days discouraged by their faith. And it certainly means avoiding any unjust discrimination based on the faith commitment of employees.

Spirituality in the workplace does create a set of problems and questions, not least because we tend to see things of the spirit as "puzzling images," and often disagree sharply about how to interpret what we see. Christians may indeed see these things more clearly because of revelation, but the spiritual goods cannot be imposed on others, they must be willingly and deliberately pursued. As a result, Christian managers cannot take responsibility for providing spiritual goods, but can only offer opportunities, ever respectful of the liberty of individuals to choose.