Spirituality in management: A new chance for management, a new challenge for spirituality

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INTRODUCTION

This Paper was presented at the Spirituality in Management workshop held in Szeged, Hungary in July 2001. It is a stimulating paper which starts with the following premise: "Could we agree with the presumption that every management model or paradigm implies (or is based on) an anthropological model or paradigm, a certain concept of what the human being is and what should be done so that he can reach his full potential?" That which determines organisational structure is not only output or strategy but also the anthropological model we use, whether explicit or implicit. If we agree with the above, we are in a better position to tackle the subject of our meeting because spirituality then becomes an "anthropological option". In other words, our point of departure is that spirituality is a "constitutive dimension of the human being".

Kerry Cochrane, Editor

Could we agree with the presumption that every management model or paradigm implies (or is based on) an anthropological model or paradigm, a certain concept of what the human being is and what should be done so that he can reach his full potential? That what determines organisational structure is not only output or strategy but also the anthropological model we use, whether explicit or implicit?

If we can agree with the above, we are in a better position to tackle the subject of our meeting because spirituality then becomes an "anthropological option". In other words, our point of departure is that spirituality is a "constitutive dimension of the human being". It gives man a good deal of his specificity, it is a central or key dimension. Spirituality would then be an "anthropologically structuring dimension" and the main challenge would be how to work on it, how to develop it, how to bring it to its maximum splendour. And it would bring us an additional challenge: search for ways to make spirituality explicit in the organisational context.

There is a difference between this approach and a more deductive approach to spirituality that puts a stronger emphasis on its link with religions. This approach would basically be interested in how to apply the teachings of the great religions (Hinduism, Taoism, Buddhism, Judaism, Christianity, Islam, and others) to management. It is probably the approach behind a certain number of publications on the lines of "Taoism and Management", "Management and the Art of War", "The Buddhist Approach to Leadership", and so on. One can learn from such contributions, but from our point of view their qualitative interest is limited. It is certainly interesting to see how historical traditions have dealt with economic relationships and the values which arose from this process. But we should be careful about believing that traditions show us the path to sanctity through work or professional activity. Work and professional activity are not forms of religious education or indoctrination, although religion may have an impact on professional behaviour. We should carefully clarify our approach and our understanding of concepts and processes linking professional activity and spirituality in order to properly target our efforts in this field.

We believe this is particularly relevant in our changing world, a world where continuous innovation affects not only technology but also processes, relations, ideas and values. To understand spirituality as the reference to an "unshaped ground" (an expression coined by Spanish Professor Mariano Corbí, who calls it "*fundamento sin forma*"), a link that fosters silence, distance, detachment, quality, may have a vital contribution to make in creating and sharing sense, purpose, orientation in a constantly changing world. This unshaped ground cannot be reduced to its particular historical configurations, to the shapes that different cultures have moulded through the ages (ideas, gestures, habits, words, images, references, practices, patterns, norms, rules, dogmas, etc.). And this unshaped ground is a reference we should not relinquish in our changing times. Such an approach to spirituality would allow us not only to make decisions but also to evaluate and discern situations

in an appropriate light because it does not consist of "contents" but of "perspectives". It also underlines the appropriateness of giving priority to personal development over simple application of traditional formulations.

Spirituality can be a source of quality for the individual and for society. But it can also be a source of quality for the organisation. Indeed, we believe this is one of the key challenges of our time (and of this meeting too). This is particularly important in a context where not only society is experiencing permanent change but corporations are becoming "knowledge organisations" or "learning organisations". If knowledge is the key asset, then developing human quality must be at the heart of the corporate structure. Accordingly, organisational criteria should ensure that human resources function smoothly and are constantly enhanced. Organisational life should take into consideration the ideas of "distance" and "human quality". And the openness of the unshaped ground becomes particularly pertinent when working with corporate values.

As a source of quality, spirituality can have a strong impact on the world of values. It can make individuals more lucid when analysing their real behaviour, their practices. It helps them develop a deeper view when trying to differentiate between values. It confers a certain qualitative nuance in the experience of values which, while difficult to define and though unquantifiable, nevertheless exists. Spirituality can also strengthen the presence of values in practices, and reinforce our commitment to putting our values into effect. Spirituality does not create new, specific values, but it can have a great impact on how we develop our world of values.

Something should be permanently kept in mind: you cannot manipulate spirituality ("you cannot fool around with it", one is tempted to say). Perhaps one can manipulate values (although one should not do that either), but not spirituality. It is too serious, it goes to the heart of the matter, the essence of the human condition, the keystone of a certain vision of reality. While this vision is not shared by everyone, many consider it essential. It is a vision that deserves respect, one which is capable of providing meaning to human life. It is also a vision capable of offering solid ground for operational values. Hypocrisy in this field is forbidden. Maybe you can (but you should not) use business ethics to further your corporate reputation, without really believing in them. But you cannot use spirituality for this purpose. Moreover, you cannot use spirituality as a management tool; it is not the last resort solution for your management problems. Nor is spirituality a business opportunity. It is essentially a free, non-utilitarian option. You cannot use the name of God in vain, as said in Exodus 20, 7.

The presentation of our seminar says, "a more inclusive, holistic and peaceful approach to management is needed if business and political leaders are to uplift the environmentally degrading and socially disintegrating world of our age." That is true, but we should add at least a third reason. Our leaders, both business and political, can also become personally "debased" or "atomised". And that makes them bad leaders. Business and politics have become too crucial for the survival and proper functioning of life on his planet to be left in the hands of debased or atomised people. We need consistent people as leaders. And spirituality has a potential role to play in the construction of this consistency. We need a new business paradigm, but it can hardly be built without a new personal paradigm. Spirituality has a role to play in establishing this paradigm. We understand true leaders to be those who encourage a freer approach to the challenges we face rather than people who merely spawn dependence and submission. Spirituality thus not only generates deeper roots and freedom, but also spurs imagination and creativity.

A serious problem for a certain Western tradition of thought (still very relevant) arises: can the future role of spirituality be limited to our personal lives? Or should spirituality also play a role in the social/public sphere? Can we make a stronghold out of an idea of a laicism that strictly separates both spheres? Or should we consider the possibility of bringing spirituality back into public life? Should we not also consider, and welcome, the possibility of a laical (relating to the laity) spirituality that does not focus on traditional religious concepts? This is significant not only for multicultural societies but also for more homogeneous societies that are experiencing a qualitative impoverishment of their public life. An impoverishment that may well be rooted in ignorance of the spiritual dimension of human life.

Spirituality can have a real impact on management through the personal quality of managers and the possibility of introducing spiritually enhanced values and practices in corporate cultures. We should go beyond the tradition of Western thought that is only capable of seeing modernisation processes as ways to separate the different spheres. Bringing this into focus is not a response to a pre-modern nostalgia or to the post-modern discussion on "anything goes". We would like to underscore the limitations of a tradition with a strong dualistic component, a tradition that is often more capable of thinking in terms of antagonism rather than integration. We should take more unifying paths, integrating paradigms so that tensions become dialogue and polarities become a dynamic feature of unity.

Great care should be taken when making references to religious traditions and when using them. Referring to traditions can be an enormous source of enrichment for us and we should explore them intensely and deeply, but not as a closed body of thought from which to deduce what to do now. Instead, we should explore them as an exercise in innovation, a search that opens new ways ahead. The accent should be kept on the present, not the past. We are creatures of our time and it behoves to us to explore ourselves and our society with the help of traditions. We experience transformation processes, both personal and organisational; we do not learn doctrines to be applied. Processes addressed at learning how to simultaneously experience detachment and motivation, how to pursue success without being a slave to success, how to fully participate in action while maintaining a distant spirit. As an example among many others, Chapters 2 to 5 of the Bhagavad Gita have much to teach in this respect.

From this perspective, we cannot always expect much from the institutions of religious traditions. They are frequently too absorbed by their efforts to survive their clash with modernity. They hardly have the time and energy to set up a dialogue amongst themselves. They have to find out how to reformulate their tradition in a way that is both true to their faith and compatible with a global, networked, multicultural, rationalistic world. It is not an easy task. Until they have made some progress in this respect they will hardly be able to contribute towards enlightening corporate culture. Incidentally, it would be advisable for them to make their struggle for survival a joint effort, or at least a coordinated one, pooling their ideas in the process. They should not be operating in a context of mutual confrontation or competition. They are all in the same boat and, if they sink, they might as well all go down together.

Accordingly, we will have to work on the subject of spirituality and management largely by ourselves. This will be harder, but more compelling, more stimulating, more challenging and more creative. We will be obliged to rethink and reformulate what spirituality is today in our specific contexts. We will have to see what ideas, relationships, values and practices, what learning processes, both personal and corporate, we can develop that are relevant to our personal lives, to our society and to corporate activity. It is a fascinating task. But the key question is whether it makes sense to speak about spirituality in the organisational context and how to do it in a significant way. From the point of view of personal development, spirituality seems to be clearly meaningful. But what are its meaning and its practical translation in an organisational context? What does it mean to explicitly work on those processes within an organisational framework? How can such ideas form part of an organisation's project?

We have said that religious organisations will not do that for us (on the contrary, they may benefit from our efforts in this field). We alone will have to draw upon the immense heritage of religious traditions to enrich our task, creating new jewels with old gems (as with all metaphors, this highlights just one aspect of a complex real-world phenomenon). Some of those gems will be flawed and useless, others will have to be polished, and some will remain intact. It is up to us to examine them and decide. Our task will be harder still if we realise that it will not be appropriate to search for gems in one field only (our own religious tradition). In a global, interconnected, shrinking world this would not be the wisest thing to do: it is less enriching, and it would go against the trends of history, which are those of exchange and communication, not isolation. So we will have to search in several different traditions at the same time, setting up a dialogue with them within our new educational and organisational contexts. And, to make matters even more complicated, we should not forget to explore those fields not labelled as religions but which nevertheless have a spiritual content.

So, our subject is certainly not "how to manage religious diversity within corporations", with all the practical problems involved. But one of the multiple consequences of our approach is certainly that corporations will have to learn to respect and treasure the contributions of their "human resources" in this area. This implies overcoming the many potential conflicts between what corporations expect from individuals and what a proper life, a life including spirituality, requires. Spiritual development needs time out from our day-to-day life, not much, but a certain amount. But, more than time, spiritual growth is only possible when there is a certain way of doing things, a certain management style, a certain way of treating people -as spiritual beings, not as objects-, the commitment to certain values, a certain atmosphere, a certain environment (a professional environment does not necessarily have to be one of cut-throat competition, tremendous psychological pressure, whirlwind activity, and a relentless drive for productivity and profits). It may very well be that this approach shows its effectiveness for the consistency of the corporation and its long term survival, if this can be a goal nowadays. But, going back to our first point: what we understand by "long term survival" or by "success" depends also on the anthropological model from which we work and for which we work.