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Spirituality at Work

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Abstract

Drawing on interviews with young and veteran professionals in a range of domains, I present four distinct models of how modern workers experience personalized spirituality at work: (1) sensing the presence of an impersonal higher force during a performance; (2) intuiting the mystery of the unknown through making discoveries; (3) envisioning a personal God who is active in all personal and occupational aspects of the believer's life; and (4) acknowledging a higher force as beyond one's immediate experience but supporting occupational activities. Model 1 is found exclusively in performing arts domains, namely theater and music, while Model 2 only in scientific research. The remaining two are found across a sample of business and social entrepreneurs, non-profit workers, and philanthropy professionals, which I classify as self-oriented domains. In this paper, I explore how these models are expressed and inform worker's conceptualizations of their work.

Amid the rise of worldwide political Islam, evangelical Christianity in the US, and Asian philosophies and practices such as yoga and meditation throughout the Western hemisphere, religion has increasingly come to the forefront of media headlines and public consciousness. President George W. Bush is especially notable for his remarkably frequent use of religious Christian imagery in his political rhetoric. At the same time, sociologists such as Wade Clark Roof (1999, 1993, 1987), Alan Wolfe (2003), and Robert Wuthnow (1998, 1997) have shown that affiliation with organized religious institutions in general has been steadily dropping among Americans. In its place, "privatized religion," or spirituality more generally, has become increasingly salient as believers embrace personalized rituals and interpretations, which may bear little resemblance to inherited traditions (Wuthnow, 1996, p. 152, 296). And while church attendance has diminished over the past forty years, today many insist that they are spiritual, with 94% of Americans claiming to believe in God, a universal spirit, or a higher power (Lyons, 2004). This prevalence of personalized spirituality is also evident at work. A report from the early 1990s claims that religious belief enhances job satisfaction (Wuthnow, 1994, p. 61-7), but a more recent article on the faith-at-work movement demonstrates how "workplace ministries" support American workers in conceptualizing and practicing their work through Christian spiritual frameworks (Shorto, 2004).

Despite the work of these scholars, the connections between spirituality and work have been largely unexplored in the social sciences.¹ The GoodWork Project, a research project studying the current state of professional domains and how individuals accomplish technically excellent work that benefits the broader society, has begun exploring the effects of religion and spirituality on the quality and enjoyment of work. A number of works from the project have pointed to the impact of religious traditions in imparting values that workers apply to their daily professional activities (Gardner, Damon, & Csikszentmihalyi, 2001; see also Csikszentmihalyi, 2003; Damon, 2004). Additionally, a study of structured contemplation and meditation has demonstrated how quasi-spiritual practices shape professional identity (Solomon, unpublished). In their article on social entrepreneurs, Barendsen and Gardner (2004) touch on the range of spiritual beliefs that these unique workers hold (p. 47). In this paper, I expand on this research from the GoodWork Project and focus on how individuals use their personal spiritual and metaphysical beliefs to shape their attitudes and conceptions of work.

Individuals connect spirituality and religion to work in a variety of manners, and as Wuthnow (1996) rightly notes, attempts to connect the two “are highly idiosyncratic, influenced...by individuals’ personal experiences and the multiple religious languages they have been exposed to” (p. 306). Some, such as an assistant district attorney in Massachusetts, demonstrate what has recently been referred to as the “ethical approach,” and attempt to apply values that they learned through religious education, such as honesty, truthfulness, and respect for others, into their work (Carroll, 2004, p. 82-3). Others, like former Malden Mills CEO Aaron Feuerstein, consider their work to be part of a broader religiously inspired mission. An observant Orthodox Jew, Feuerstein considers “doing good and being of service to other people” as “the greatest good deed, *mitzvah*, that one can do.” Since a *mitzvah* is also a commandment from God, he fulfills his religious duty by acting compassionately towards others while simultaneously putting into practice some of his deeply held values.

¹ A notable exception is Robert Wuthnow. In *Good and Mammon in America* (1994) and *Poor Richard’s Principle* (1996), he explores how spirituality affects job satisfaction and performance and how it, among

While these perspectives merit close investigation, I focus here on another pattern: individuals who imagine the divine and subsume it into everyday life and connect this belief to their daily work practices. Despite differences in their description of the spiritual entity, these individuals report that they interact with or contemplate God or an impersonal higher power on a regular basis. The perspectives take four distinct forms and map onto individuals' work in professional realms, or *domains* that consist of the knowledge, skills, practices, rules, and values particular to a given profession, in illuminating ways (Gardner, et al., 2001, p. 26).

Specifically, some actors and musicians sense and attempt to make manifest onstage during performances a higher power that is impersonal, in that it lacks anthropomorphic attributes and attitudes, while a small group of research geneticists connect pushing the boundaries of human knowledge with encountering the mystery of the spiritual. These paradigms are found in performance domains in the case of the former and in scientific research in the case of the latter. Two other paradigms emerge only among the sample of business and social entrepreneurs, non-profit workers, and philanthropy professionals, and these are present across the domains despite the widely disparate nature of the work. Some demonstrate Born-again Christian belief in a personal God, a divinity that is present in, cares about, and guides the life of the believer. By contrast, others maintain a belief in an impersonal force that resides in the background of existence to which they can appeal for support but is far removed from the everyday reality of their jobs.

These patterns yield important insights about the manifestation of spiritual beliefs in various professional settings, how workers conceptualize their work, as well as the nature of spiritual beliefs and individuals' relationships to them. For some workers, such as those who speak of a Christian God in their lives or the spirit to be actualized onstage, spirituality is a highly salient feature of their personal and occupational lives. It tends to play a significant role in framing their outlook on the world in general and the contours of their occupational activities more specifically. Others posit the existence of a spiritual reality but place it beyond their daily experience, referring to it as a point of reference or

other factors, can restrain economic behavior and the appetite for material gain.

inspiration in difficult times. They sense its presence on an occasional basis and consider its role in their reflections on their work and practice. Given this range of attitudes, the patterns reflect a remarkable variety in spiritual and religious interpretation and experience that can bring nuance to understandings of motivations for work in general.

In this paper, following discussions of a number of terms that I will use, background information on the GoodWork Project and the data drawn upon for this study, I present the four models of spiritual belief that are connected to professional domains. In an effort to construct the paradigms, I first introduce examples and quotes from a range of interviews. Afterward, I present my own comments and analysis in an attempt to highlight certain trends and patterns. This includes discussions of how spiritual beliefs may assist workers on the job, the ways in which professional domains may affect spiritual discourse within them, and how workers differ in their conceptions of their personal agency and its impact on their work.

Definition of terms

“Spiritual” and “religious”

In considering how modern professionals bring spirituality into their work, it is useful to examine the word “spirituality” itself and the historical dialectic between individual and communal beliefs and modes of practice. Fuller (2001) notes that prior to the twentieth century, the terms *spiritual* and *religious* were synonymous in the English language, connoting a belief in a higher power of some kind and a desire to deepen one’s connection with that power through various rituals, practices, and daily moral behaviors (p. 5). While tensions between private and public belief and praxis is inherent in most religions, Fuller argues that by the twentieth century, “the term *spiritual* gradually came to be associated with the private realm of thought and experience while the word *religious* came to connected with the public realm of membership in religious institutions, participation in formal rituals, and adherence to official denominational doctrines” (Ibid., p. 5). As many people became disillusioned with or distanced themselves from formal religious institutions for a variety of reasons, they were able to

maintain an interest in their personal metaphysical concerns, regardless of their institutional involvement or lack thereof.

In an attempt to specify considerations of “the spiritual,” William James (1903/1985) argued that it consists of attitudes, ideas, lifestyles, and specific practices based upon a conviction “1) that the visible world is part of a more spiritual universe from which it draws its chief significance, and 2) that union or harmonious relation with this ‘spiritual more’ is our true end” (p. 382). This very belief in a spiritual universe beyond the visible and material world and individuals’ attempts to come into an improved relationship with it is at the heart of James’ study. I believe that James’ framework is useful, yet it neglects the workplace, wherein most Americans spend a significant amount of their waking hours. In order to develop a more complete picture of human spiritual behavior, it is also important to consider this sphere, as well.

For the purposes of this study, I will adopt the definitions of *spiritual* and *religious* that have been discussed thus far. “Spirituality” will refer to private, inner experiences and beliefs that are based on a conviction of a more spiritual universe beyond what is visible, while “religious” will refer to affiliation and association with public institutions.²

Self-oriented domains

As I noted earlier, some spiritual paradigms appear to be restricted to certain professional domains while others span the fields of business and social entrepreneurship, non-profit work, and philanthropy. These are diverse fields whose goals and methods can be widely disparate. Philanthropic organizations fund a wide range of social and research initiatives, while the non-profit sector attempts to establish programs to effect change on a variety of levels. Business entrepreneurship entails selling products in innovative ways while social entrepreneurship involves using business models to tackle broad social inequalities.

² While the spiritual/religious distinction is helpful for understanding personal belief and practice, especially given that few individuals interviewed for the GoodWork Project explicitly identify with a religion or denomination, it may potentially blur the impact of social and cultural sources on the two. That is, regardless of the extent to which people talk about their private beliefs and practices, they are still shaped by ideas and trends within society. Nevertheless, I believe that the distinction, if only provisional, is

While the differences are apparent, these domains share one common feature: absence of a traditional professional support structure, with the accompanying codes, self-governing boards, and limitations on the scope of practice. This lack, I submit, catalyzes a need for individual practitioners to assert a “self-oriented identity” in their work (Solomon, unpublished).³ Much of the work in these domains entails independent activities, and while such an occupation can attract independent-minded people, it also can result in a sense of isolation and weak sense of community and network of peers. While an analysis of these domains along these lines is beyond the scope of this paper, I will employ the term “self-oriented domain” to refer to these occupational domains as I describe how various spiritual paradigms are expressed within them.

Project Background

The data for this paper have been gleaned from the GoodWork Project, which has collected a unique data set of interviews with over 1200 veteran and young professionals in domains as diverse as journalism, genetics, business, higher education, the performing arts, law, and medicine. The semi-structured interviews last between one to two hours in length. They probe for workers’ sense of responsibility, religious or secular beliefs and values, personal and professional goals, and the impact of mentors and other workers in a specific field, among other items.

My analysis is based on an examination of nearly 200 interviews with veteran and young workers, who range in age from the early 20’s through mid 70’s, in business and social entrepreneurship, the performing arts, science, and philanthropy.⁴ These domains were selected in an attempt to discover unifying patterns across diverse work practices and age cohorts. In each interview, researchers routinely posed questions about religious and spiritual issues, such as “Do spiritual or religious beliefs guide you in your work?” and

important for the current study, for it allows for a focus on the individual and his or her attempts to negotiate multiple metaphysical and occupational discourses.

³ Whereas Solomon uses the term “self-oriented identity” to describe workers’ use of various metaphors in constructing their personal narratives, I use the term more broadly, as indicated in the following.

⁴ Throughout this paper, names are provided if the interviewee has granted permission. Otherwise, names have been changed or omitted.

“What are some core beliefs or values that guide you in your work?” Additionally, some individuals also made unprompted references to it. Forty-four respondents independently volunteered reflections on their religious experiences, an indication of its salience to their lives, and forty-one discussed it in response to interviewer queries. Sixty percent of the seventy-five interviewees in business, including both veteran practitioners (n=40) and young entrepreneurs (n=35), indicated that religion or spirituality were important to them in their lives and their work. Alternately, only 11.1% (n=8) of veteran and young scientists reported that this was important to them. Among theater performers, 36.9% of veterans and young professionals (n=21) discussed the importance of spirituality, reflecting a more modest relationship.

Since questions about spirituality and religion were intentionally broad, respondents provided a wide range of responses. In addition, since the project methodology did not include participant-observation research, we lack information on how these issues are made visibly manifest in the workplace. Nonetheless, the data provided important information on how many of today’s workers connect their private metaphysical beliefs with the daily practice of work.

Models of Spirituality at Work

Performing arts – Spiritual seekers experiencing the divine onstage

Contemporary theater professionals are aware of and frequently discuss their domain’s connection to the ancient Greek theater and its historical religious and public significance. They cite parallels between their own practice and that of the ancients: the stage can serve as an altar, actors follow scripts similar to hymnals and prayer books, and audience members sit in pews and quietly pay attention while a performance is staged. These actors and other professionals involved in staged performances emphasize the tangible and overt features of theater, making explicit connections to its public and religious characteristics.

These performers are reminiscent of the spiritual seekers whom Roof (1999) discusses along with metaphysical believers. Both types of individuals maintain a belief in an

impersonal universal spirit that pervades reality and ordinary sense consciousness that can be described in terms of universal “energies,” “inner voices,” “vibrations,” “chakras,” “elemental forces (p. 210),” and “God-presence (p. 212).” The spirit is abstract, yet it can be realized and made present in daily life. While Roof does not explicitly draw distinctions between the two groups, it seems as though *spiritual seekers* may be distinguished by ritualistic and quasi-ritualistic attempts to realize that spirit in their lives in order to prompt spiritual growth and development while *metaphysical believers* seem to settle with acknowledging its presence.

A number of actors and musicians seem to adopt the seeker attitude toward the spiritual as they relate accounts of personal spiritual experiences while watching or taking part in performances. They attempt to connect with the divine that operates within and behind their words, actions, and music. Yet the manner in which they interact with and describe it is quite varied, and their realization of that spirit is largely dependent upon their efforts.

Examples

Performers express their spiritual experiences in the arts through a variety of lenses and religious idioms. A young Indian-American actor employs Hindu symbolism, locating the cosmic and eternal vibration of the syllable “OM” onstage when performances take place. Another young actress who is a Zen Buddhist lay practitioner discusses how her lifelong meditation practice has helped her to exist and be present in “that simultaneity of chaos and total stillness” onstage. This may be taken as a reflection of that sect’s emphasis on paying attention to each moment and discovering the truth that it yields about reality.

Two jazz musicians adopt Christian terminology and specifically speak of experiencing God’s presence in their performances. Rachael Warren, an actor with the Trinity Repertory Company, feels that concepts from earth-centered religions help connect her to her work, while both a veteran actor and an acting student maintain that there is a connection between theater and an impersonal “higher power.” The variety of expressions and the use of expansive terms that are indicative of metaphysical believers and spiritual seekers are noteworthy and highlight the personalized experiences that these performers report.

For some actors and musicians, the stage may replicate an actual altar or at least becomes a location where, in the words of Shakespeare & Co. director Tina Packer, “God is seen or heard.” The aforementioned veteran actor reports that the stage is a “very sacred place” where he encounters “whatever spiritual deity there is,” a comment that indicates his belief in an impersonal higher power. Likewise, Tomás, a Latin American jazz pianist claims, “music comes from a source of energy” that musicians can channel in their performances. Ron Savage, a prominent jazz drummer, explains his belief that in order to play expressively, he needs to connect with and be present with God during the performance. While these individuals envision the spiritual entity as a deity, not all take it in this manner. The Indian-American actor discussed above locates the cosmic vibration OM onstage and indicates that actors can activate and draw on its power. While they seem to differ in their conceptions of a higher power, each performer reflects an understanding of the performance space as a locus at which that power can be contacted and connected to their work.

Yet despite its presence onstage, the higher power is not automatically accessible to performers; it is latent. They must engage in a variety of practices and actions in order to activate it. Performers cite proper motivation and intention. Two young actors suggest that actors who treat the stage with respect, such as the Indian-American actor who conceives it as “a holy place where the possibilities are endless,” can create a spiritual experience for actors and audience members simply by intending the spirit to come through their work. Others petition the higher power or engage in prayer. Ron Savage prays prior to taking the stage in order to “clear [his] mind and focus and channel [his] energy,” to “put [him] more in touch with God and [his] spiritual side.” Likewise, a young actor named Juan Luís discusses his attempts to “put [his] job in God’s hands.” In both of these examples, the musician and actors call upon God immediately prior to commencing their performances in the hopes of bringing the benefits and energy of the higher power to bear on their work. In a similar manner, another female theater student initiates each performance with a meditation on the broader spiritual forces that brought her to her work, in an attempt to center and prepare herself for the task. Alternately, this

preparation need not entail specific rituals or intentions but could simply include the act of performance. Despite Tomás' claims that God-energy is behind the music, he seems to posit a causal relationship between his actions and the emergence of God-energy: he plays and the spirit results without further effort on his part. These performers indicate a sense that while the higher power is all-pervading, they need to be actualize it.

Many performers who envision the spiritual entity onstage rely on it for support in their work. The initial and ongoing impetus for Savage's praying before a show is to ask for help in playing to his potential as a musician. Likewise, in putting his "job in God's hands," Juan Luís asks for God's help in staying focused on the frequently difficult requirements of his various roles. He inwardly speaks to God, imploring, "Listen, help me in this journey," but he does not claim to receive literal responses from him. Rather, he intimates a sense of emotional support during in these times. Denise Greber, a box office manager and performer, claims that the spiritual energy of her fellow actors in one show enhanced the quality and excitement of the performance, supporting the other performers indirectly. These performers seem to view the process of spiritual seeking in the context of performance as an opportunity to gain emotional support and to confirm the quality and value of their performance skills and abilities. They seem to emerge from the encounter with a heightened sense of their own capabilities.

Comments

Professional actors and musicians reflect a belief in a vaguely defined higher power that is immediately present in their vocational activities. The use of various vaguely defined terms and idioms, such as "spiritual feeling," "cosmic vibration," and "God-energy," bears strong resemblance to mystics who shroud their own experiences in language that does not explicitly describe them but merely hints at their properties. This same quality also points to connections with the phenomenon of *flow*, an experience in which an individual feels completely immersed in an activity. One is absorbed to the extent that he or she feels like being "carried away by a current, everything moving smoothly without effort" (Csikszentmihalyi, 1993, p. xiii). Csikszentmihalyi (1993) claims that flow can occur in a variety of contexts, including both work and play, and frequently includes

feelings of transcendence and universal harmony (p. xiv). Moreover, individuals note a loss of conscious control over their actions. Performers' various comments on spiritual experiences may in fact indicate the presence of flow; they discuss it in the spiritual vocabulary with which they are familiar. A rather striking example is the Latin American jazz musician's comments on his sensing "God-energy" in music:

And I have felt many times the presence of this energy – you know, the God-energy – through the music and in situations where I have been able to perform with no preparation at all. But the music spoke to the people. And you felt like you weren't doing anything, but the reaction from the public to you was amazing.

When he is having a flow-like experience while performing, this musician feels as though he is not playing but rather serving as a channel for the music. His surprise at the audience's frequent positive responses underscores his sense that he does not exercise any intentionality in his playing. He plays the music, but the energy behind it simply happens. Most important, he frames this experience with his personalized spiritual vocabulary: God-energy comes through the music. This suggests a potentially significant connection between mystical or spiritual experience and flow, in that such experiences could be a form of flow.

Characteristics of the performing arts domains may influence how workers combine their beliefs and vocational activities. In attempting to create a performance that will affect an audience, actors and musicians are frequently taught to draw on their emotions and to search for private sources to enhance their artistic expression. This frequent emphasis on personal and emotional interpretation may attract performers who envision the spiritual in a personal and eclectic manner and encourage them to apply their interpretations to their work. Additionally, the primary workspace, the stage, may also delimit and define the types of spiritual experiences that the actors and musicians may report. They claim that spiritual interactions take place onstage and primarily, though not exclusively, during performances. This may point to the impact of the place of work on how individuals approach work and how they carry it out.

GoodWork Project researchers Marshall and Reese (2001) also argue that the domain of theater values the search for truth, a characteristic that seems to overlap with the spiritual seeker orientation. In their analysis of the domain, Marshall and Reese argue that nearly all of those interviewed for their study discuss at length the importance of truth, exploration, and understanding (p. 6). Each of these could be construed as characteristics of spiritual seekers, and many of the performers treated here seem to consider the individually verified spiritual experience to be an exploration of unseen reality, and hence, a type of truth. If the domain sanctions these values in a secular manner, it is plausible that this would encourage workers to explore them spiritually.

When dealing with conceptions of a supernatural force and its interactions within material existence, and given the agency traditionally ascribed to deities in precipitating events, it is important to examine how spiritual believers conceive of their own agency and autonomy in the world. Spiritual seeker performers in fact demonstrate an interesting and diverse profile regarding perceptions of their personal agency. Most maintain that the higher power is latent and requires their activation through intentioned ritual or other preparation. To this extent, they seem to indicate a high level of agency in the spiritual realm. They are capable of bringing the divine into their performances, and unless they make a conscious effort to do so, it will not be realized.

Yet they also demonstrate a nuanced sense of their personal agency in occupational matters. They express a belief in their own abilities and agency, and while the spirit may support them, they are nevertheless the ones to accomplish the tasks. Whether they honor to spirit onstage or focus on the forces that have brought them to a performance, they consider themselves responsible for whatever transpires. Even the jazz musicians who note the presence of God in their work still indicate that they, and not God, play the music; the spiritual supports them in their self-directed activities. The divine is considered a support for performers, but it does not assume agency in worldly affairs.

Scientific research – The spirituality of discovering the unknown

With its emphasis on objectivity and independent verification of findings, science has traditionally maintained a hostile attitude toward religion. The inability to prove metaphysical arguments was a favorite target of Enlightenment-era thinkers who promoted the scientific method, and throughout the twentieth century, many scientists have dismissed religion and spirituality as simple-minded mythology. Yet a surprising 1996 study of 1,000 scientists found that nearly 40% still maintain a belief in a personal God, a level unchanged when the survey was first administered in 1916 (Larson & Witham, 1997). Apart from those who maintain such images of God, a small sample of geneticists offer a completely different spiritual profile. While they reject blind belief in God, they associate the search for truth through the scientific method with spiritual discovery. Their scientific endeavors give rise to a unique form of spirituality that seems linked to the content of their experiences in their domain. At its root, it is appreciation for the scope and seemingly limitless bounds of nature, yet one that excludes an explicit interaction with the divine.

Examples

The most prominent feature of geneticists' discussions of spirituality is the role of discovery of new knowledge. Scientists are engaged in an enterprise aimed at developing new theories and gathering information about the natural world through research. Yet in strikingly similar ways, three of the 75 geneticists interviewed report awareness of the vastness of nature that they describe as spiritual. They recognize how little they understand and consider the natural world as mysterious and unknown.

This recognition seems to yield a sense of infinitude that they consider a type of spiritual insight, as it relates to what may be construed as the spiritual universe. Jay Murthy, at the time of his interview a graduate student in the biological sciences, notes,

You can't help but be a little spiritual as a scientist because everyday you're living on the edge of what is known and what is unknown. And what is not known is so vast compared to what is known.

This sense of the mystery of the unknown and its equation with the spiritual universe is also evidenced among the older cohort of scientists. A veteran geneticist specifically cites a sense of “awe and respect... both for what you're finding out about the universe, and also the goal for which you're doing it.” Referencing overtly religious language, a post-doctoral research fellow notes that scientific research and contemplating the mysteriousness of nature is “as close to God as you can get.” While they do not make claims to mystical or metaphysical knowledge, these scientists concede the boundaries of human understanding and share a sense of wonder for whatever extends beyond it.

Comments

These scientists do not claim to be mystics or to possess privileged knowledge of reality or God. Indeed, they recognize how little they actually know. Rather, they share their excitement of their revelations of the connections within the world and the mystery of nature. In this way, they avoid making claims that would not only violate the standards of the domain in which they were trained and operate, but would also undermine their credibility as scientists.

The attitude these scientists convey may be an effort to counteract the strong materialistic and anti-spiritual tendencies of the domain. It seems to operate in a private sphere and does not seem to affect the quality or methodology of the research. Additionally, the informants shy from identifying with religion in general, claiming that while they may be “spiritual,” they are certainly not “religious.” Language with overt connections to institutional religion is avoided. Even the young geneticist’s statement that his personal spiritual attitude is “as close to God as you can get” may indicate an effort to distance himself from patently religious language.

Perceptions of personal agency along spiritual and occupational dimensions among these research scientists are generally not surprising. Since they do not show evidence of believing in an active and reactive spiritual force with which they can interact in their work, the scientists do not seem to maintain a sense of personal agency in the spiritual realm. Whereas they intellectually and emotionally approach potential meanings of the

spiritual, they do not see themselves as actors within its realm. They do, however, seem to view themselves as possessing significant agency in the occupational realm. By not believing in a deity that can incite events in the material world and implicitly embracing the scientific method as the privileged means of learning about the natural world, they preclude the possibility of a spiritual force impelling events and objects in their work.

Self-oriented domains – God-centered spirituality

An October 2004 *New York Times Magazine* article on the American faith-at-work movement demonstrates how increasing numbers of Americans bring evangelical Christian practices and attitudes into the workplace (Shorto, 2004). Rather than hiding their faith, as would have been the case thirty years earlier, these Christians openly pray, hold Bible study sessions, and occasionally proselytize in settings as diverse as the Intel Corporation and local banks founded on “Biblical principles.” Evangelical groups geared toward spreading the faith-at-work movement, such as the International Coalition of Workplace Ministries, have recognized a hunger for spirituality among American workers and have been quite effective at disseminating materials that guide people in integrating their spiritual beliefs into their vocational activities.

Given the popularity of this movement and the power of this form of Christianity in the workplace, it is no surprise that a significant number of workers demonstrate what Roof (1999) identifies as “Born-again Christian” beliefs and behaviors. These include an acceptance of a traditional Christian theology as outlined in the New Testament, combined with a belief in a personal God that is interested in enhancing the quality of each believer’s life. Furthermore, a primary goal of spiritual practice is to establish a deep, personal relationship with God (p. 183). Believers seem to accept their role as simple cast members in a universal divine plan, but they feel that they can interface with and experience God directly through prayer and active dialogue with him. The fulfillment of material and spiritual needs is paramount in many types of Born-again Christianity, which devotees attempt to acquire through supplications in prayer. Moreover, there is an attempt to recognize “the accessibility and the power of the Lord’s intimate and constant

presence” in the believer’s life, a reflection of the desire to come into an improved relationship with the spiritual universe that James noted (Hill cited in Roof, 1999, p. 188).

Of particular note is that the individuals reflecting these beliefs and attitudes are generally under the age of 40 and work in some of the self-oriented domains, such as business and social entrepreneurship, philanthropy, and non-profit. This may demonstrate the strength of evangelical and other Born-again Christian ministries on college campuses since the 1970s, who have increased the number of white-collar professionals in their churches.

Examples

The most striking characteristic of workers reflecting God-centered spirituality is their conception of a personal God and ways in which the divine is made manifest to them. An executive at an inner-city African-American church organization discusses her personal conversion experience, a standard component of evangelical forms of Christianity in which an individual recognizes the immediacy of God’s presence and interest in his or her life. During a worship service as a teenager, she sensed “that God was speaking” to her “personally, and that the words in the scripture and in hymns...were being offered personally.” The director of an urban mission at a suburban evangelical church reflects a similar conception of divine interest in her life. She also demonstrates a recognition of her “calling,” which is a prominent feature of Protestant Christianity, as a path through which a believer can serve God by viewing his or her “secular work as a divinely appointed duty (Wuthnow, 1996, p. 300).” While driving in her car one day, she heard God speaking to her, predicting that she would fill a counseling position at her church, despite the fact that she lacked the required training. Following an eighteen-month search process in which she helped to interview other candidates, she claims that “God used various people and situations to confirm” her initial insight from him. She was ultimately chosen to take the position. While reflecting a range of formats of interfacing with the divine, these examples depict the belief that God is interested in one’s life and directs his grace in specific situations for the spiritual and material well-being of the believer.

Reflecting a comfort with and adherence to a Christian cosmology, God-centered workers also employ traditional religious metaphors quite frequently in discussing their work. Earl Phalen, an African-American social entrepreneur and CEO of a small foundation providing educational programming to inner-city students, speaks emphatically of the notion that all beings are created in the image of God. His work as a social entrepreneur centers on empowering poor black and Latino children and parents through exposing them to progressive education and economic opportunities. His religiously inspired belief in the inherent equality of all humans provides the central philosophical basis for his work. Likewise, Melinda Tuan, a former director of a venture philanthropy firm, expresses her view that all people are broken and “in need of redemption.” She connects her work supporting community enterprises that provide employment opportunities to indigent people with her religious belief in the nature of the soul. By using such strong religious metaphors, these workers demonstrate the salience of religious modes of conceptualizing their world and their occupational endeavors.

While they may not claim God directs their lives, some individuals demonstrate a strong sense of divinely inspired mission or purpose, both in their lives in general and in their work. In discussing what brought her to her occupation, Melinda Tuan simply states, “God has a reason for us to be here and a time for us to be here.” Her comment reflects her sense that not only is God interested in and directing her life but that her work is part of a broader plan. While such bold claims are rare, others possess a similar confidence in their life path and God’s guidance of it. A young business entrepreneur argues that God put faith in him into her life to help in accomplishing her goals. Workers tend to see themselves as an object of God’s influence, a component of a complex divine plan that they do not comprehend.

More than simply viewing their lives as part of a loosely construed divine plan that they cannot understand, some individuals demonstrate a belief that God is directly involved in and guides their work. Corey Ackerman, CEO of an internet-based fine art firm, claims that a central tenet guiding his work is his “faith and belief in God, the belief that there is someone greater who controls everything *that happens for me* in the entire world” [italics

added]. In his interview, Ackerman seemed confident and independent, yet he clearly considers himself to be a subordinate actor in a broader divine plan. The executive from the African-American church organization demonstrates a similar, though nuanced, attitude. God is “the source for all of my decision-making criteria,” she claims, admitting a belief that God impacts the manner in which she makes decisions, but not discussing their agency or origin.

Having accepted the assumption that they are simply components of a broader divine plan and that God is intensely interested in their lives and actions, individuals demonstrating God-centered spirituality also attempt to interface directly with God. The most common method is via prayer. Whereas such private rituals have historically been common features of Christianity, young workers from this sample demonstrate a revealing trend. Unlike veteran businesspeople, who broadly discuss their prayers for guidance in making decisions, these workers are more explicit in establishing causal relationships between their prayers and actions, and God’s impact. “I always pray for His guidance, and I think that He is leading me,” Gloria Ro Kolb, a young business entrepreneur reports, “in terms of making some big decisions in business or something like that.” Earl Phalen and Corey Ackerman also ask for specific guidance in business decisions, yet they frame their interactions as conversations. After talking with God, Phalen believes that the answers he receives “are from God and [are] not in any way but that.” Ackerman reports a similar feeling, noting,

...By communicating with Him and talking with Him and constantly praying about my situations, the decisions that I make, I’m able to more or less do the right thing. And if I don’t do the right thing, it’s usually because I’m getting to the point where I’m starting to forget...and you tend to leave your faith behind.

By praying about specific situations and problems, Ackerman receives guidance and feedback on a regular basis from God. These examples point to a sense that the divine is continuously responsive to the needs of believers, and the practices reinforce the sense that God is present with these individuals in the workplace.

A further revealing characteristic of God-centered spirituality as evidenced by these workers reflects the influence of what has been referred to as “prosperity theology.” With modern roots in Russell Conwell’s 1915 *Acres of Diamonds* and other “gospel of riches” literature and its increasing popularity in evangelical groups and faith-at-work movements (Wuthnow, 1996, p. 306), this theological perspective is rooted in the belief that God is interested in and cares about the quality of experience of each individual. Adherents advocate that God wants his believers to have material comfort and professional success. “I do believe that God wants us to be successful,” Ro Kolb shares, “He wants to bless us.” This attitude reflects a new sensualist dimension that has grown alongside the ascetic Calvinist tendencies of business and capitalism that sociologist Max Weber (1930) argued were instrumental to the development of the latter in America. Material success is no longer simply an indicator of one’s elect status for the afterlife; it is a reflection of God’s love and intention to make life easier and more comfortable in the present material world. It also reflects the interpenetration of cultural norms, like the pursuit for material wealth, into spiritual teachings.

Comments

A common critique of Born-again faith focuses on the self-centered language and focus on the fulfillment of personal needs, yet each individual in this sample is actively involved in professions that entail directly servicing another individual. Whether a business entrepreneur or community organizer, each provides a specific service to clients who gain direct material benefit from the labor. That is, they provide goods and services to clients who span the socioeconomic scale. From a religious perspective, this may support their intentions to follow the example of Christ, to embody him by “loving other people [and] caring for them,” as Melinda Tuan indicates. It could also allow them to visualize themselves as performing God’s good works on earth.⁵

While they continuously interact with a range of clients in their daily work, they may also experience a distinct sense of isolation, given their roles in self-oriented domains. The

everyday realities of work may be fraught with financial and logistical uncertainty that the lack of emotional and psychological support from colleagues may exacerbate. Moreover, the domains of entrepreneurship and philanthropy require workers to be very independent and operate without a strong network of peers or community (Horn and Gardner, in press). This isolation and doubt may give rise to the need for spiritual support at work and the sense that God cares about and guides their lives. For many of these workers, envisioning God as supporting and encouraging their occupational behaviors may provide the emotional scaffolding that enables them to function.

These individuals also demonstrate a striking dynamic regarding their perceptions of personal agency. Many tend to express a decisive belief that they can catalyze divine intervention and precipitate events in the world through prayer. These attitudes bear resemblance to evangelists who impel followers to pray to God and claim that the resulting material wealth or physical healing comes through the grace of God. While the workers considered here are not so brazen as to express this belief in the same manner, they nonetheless maintain that God cares about and listens to believers and that he responds to requests from them. This perspective yields a high degree of perceived agency in the realm of the spiritual.

Despite the belief that they can induce outcomes through spiritual rituals, paradoxically, these individuals suggest that they personally possess little agency in the material world of work. While they may hold important positions that require leadership and high level decision-making skills, they claim that they are merely letting God work through them, and they seem to view themselves as passive vessels through which work is done. This attitude is expressed in a variety of formats: the executive of the inner city African-American organization conceives of God as the source of her decision-making criteria, Corey Ackerman posits that God controls whatever happens to him, and Gloria Ro Kolb envisions God as leading and blessing her both in her personal life and at work. In each of these specific examples lies an acceptance of God's power and influence in the

⁵ This behavior may also provide the opportunity for workers to proselytize clients, which is a central component of evangelical Christianity. However, the workers considered in this study do not show

material world. As a result, responsibility at work belongs not to them – but rather, to God – as these believers ascribe to themselves remarkably low agency in making decisions and leading their respective organizations and projects. This feature is particularly noteworthy given the independence and responsibility demanded by the domains in which these individuals work. While they show no evidence of taking credit for successes neither do they abdicate responsibility for negative outcomes. Perhaps this attitude serves as a coping mechanism, one that will enable workers to weather difficult situations.

As noted previously, the modes of belief and practice illustrated by workers with God-centered spirituality bear strong resemblance to those of Born-again Christians. While the workers do not explicitly identify with or signal any connection to the faith-at-work movement, their attitudes are strikingly similar. The discussions of a personal God, frequent divine intervention and involvement, and the power of prayer yield a distinct mode of religious practice. As a result, it seems unlikely that the approaches to integrating spirituality and work outlined here would be applicable to others who are traditionally religious, such as Orthodox Jews and Muslims. These traditions have developed vastly different conceptions of theology and religious practice that would preclude them from envisioning God in a similar manner and applying that to the workplace. Moreover, it must be remembered that the Christians discussed thus far are only one type. Devout members of mainline churches that would not be characterized as Born-again, like Episcopalian and Presbyterian, may be less likely to discuss spirituality in the same way, much less connect it to work in this manner. They may bring religious values to their work, or depending on their beliefs, adopt some of the orientations discussed in this paper.

evidence of demonstrating this.

Self-oriented domains – A “spiritual feeling” about work

In contrast to those who envision God or a higher power intimately involved in their work, a significant number of young business and social entrepreneurs report a general “spiritual feeling” in their occupations. Frequently identifying as “spiritual” individuals and distancing themselves from organized religious groups, they are reminiscent of Roof’s (1999) metaphysical believers, who maintain a belief in an impersonal universal spirit that pervades reality. While the aforementioned workers who demonstrate God-centered or seeker spirituality tend to believe that a divinity either actively influences work or becomes present through it, those who possess a general metaphysical or spiritual feeling maintain that the higher power is a remote background support for their actions. The former actively interface with the divine, but this cohort draws support from it in their work and attempts to live in accordance with it.

Examples

Many individuals report a belief in a higher or greater power, although it is rarely identified as God. Rather, discussions of an impersonal force center on the divinity’s imminence, meaning that it is proximal to everyday experience, or transcendence, meaning that it lies beyond the ken of humans. Two respondents argue for the spiritual entity’s immanence, claiming that it resides within people and is made manifest by them. One social entrepreneur who directs a nationwide conflict resolution program locates it within relationships: “God is that thing that’s bigger than all of us...that when folks come together, they...create something that his bigger than the sum of the people involved.” Joseph, the director of an education company claims that the higher power is “in all of us.” Others argue that the impersonal divine lies beyond immediate human contact. It is seen to be far larger in scope than the self or any group, as it serves as the source of existence. Still others avoid discussion of a deity altogether, preferring to consider the spiritual as the totality of reality, and their reflections on this constitute “spirituality.” Yet regardless of individuals’ attempts to locate and conceive of the spiritual, it is consistently identified in a highly impersonal manner.

Workers use their loosely defined conceptions of divinity or spiritual reality to gain perspective on the broader implications of their work in times of stress. When David Levin, the superintendent of a network of schools in low-income communities, feels overwhelmed by the myriad details and conflicts requiring his attention, he reflects on his spiritual outlook to keep everything “in perspective” and himself focused. Likewise, a business entrepreneur draws on her belief in a higher power to remind herself of things bigger than her mundane concerns. Positing an expansive context in which they live allows these individuals to negotiate daily vicissitudes and remain focused on the intentions of their work.

Perhaps the most striking feature demonstrated by individuals is the ways in which helping others is viewed through a spiritual lens, as they tie social responsibility with spiritual beliefs. Those who infuse their work with spirituality seem to reflect recognition of mutual interdependence and their specific responsibilities to others. David Levin notes, “I am a very spiritual person.” Although he cannot openly discuss religion or spirituality in the public school in which he works, he views the future of the children on whose behalf he works “with religious nature.” He thus imbues his work with spiritual meaning, enhancing his practical responsibility to help educate the children. Interestingly, one young business entrepreneur also exhibits such an attitude, claiming that his work in the business aspects of biomedical technology gives him “a spiritual feeling that it seems like the right thing to do.” He remarks that if the intention of the work is to improve the condition of others, any entrepreneurial work could be spiritual.

To try and do things that make people live better lives and make the country a better country, and make the world a better place. And so that could be providing jobs for people, and we’re recruiting, so that makes me feel good. It may be creating a new technology that can benefit this country and other countries. It may be executing an entrepreneurial plan.

While the ethos of entrepreneurship entails creativity, it also encompasses providing goods and services to others, as previously noted. The weaving of spiritual meaning into it enables the workers to perceive a deep impact and can provide positive reinforcement in the face of struggle and setback.

In contrast to workers demonstrating God-centered spirituality, those who claim a general spiritual feeling about their work show a strong reliance on a personal value system that they connect with their perceptions of the spiritual entity. Oftentimes, they consider this higher power to be generally benevolent in nature, and they feel that their values are in accordance with it. That is, rather than appealing to values from major religious traditions, these individuals rely on their own ethical intuitions, which they link to their spiritual beliefs. Lauren Creamer, a social entrepreneur, views the spiritual as that which is “bigger than the human race.” Yet rather than asking for guidance from it in pressing times, she feels the need to “stay connected to myself and my value system and let that guide me. Then I’m able to reach better decisions for myself.” The spiritual entity does not explicitly dictate values nor provide guidance by way of directions and action steps. Rather, Creamer seems to assume that every decision she makes will yield positive outcomes, a move that reinforces her faith in herself and, she claims, prevents her from falling into habitual patterns of self-blame. In a similar fashion, when Joseph, the director of an education firm, makes a decision, he relies on his “own deeper or ethical or spiritual voice.” Having posited the existence of a transcendent higher power to which he is intimately connected, he may assure himself that whatever decisions he makes are in accordance with this power. By envisioning a supportive higher power, workers reveal its perceived positive and nurturing characteristics and its effect on their self-confidence.

Comments

Like workers in self-oriented domains who envision a Christian form of God as an active participant in their work, these individuals view the spiritual as a source for encouragement, a metaphysical entity that allows them to refresh and reconnect with their intentions for working in difficult times. Yet their position lacks a sense of the immediate and personal presence of the divine. While there is a divergence of attitudes among workers who have a “spiritual feeling” as to whether the divine is proximal to human existence or transcendent from it, there is no sense that it is experienced in any immediate manner. As a continuous spiritual reality, it is constantly accessible but drawn on selectively.

There are also striking patterns in perceptions of universal and occupational agency. Despite workers' attempts at locating the higher power, their attitudes belie a belief in its mysterious and unknowable nature. Moreover, since it exists independently and beyond them, their actions do not have influence in the spiritual domain. They reflect on its nature, but they do not actively influence it. Whereas workers maintaining God-centered spirituality see the divine as an active participant in their lives who reacts to their prayers, these individuals tend to believe that they possess a comparatively low level of spiritual agency.

On the other hand, this aversion to human influence in the spiritual domain corresponds to a high level of perceived agency in the occupational realm. Workers consider themselves to be directly responsible for their work and decisions, and the spiritual force in which they believe does not directly or overtly impact their daily activities and decisions. While they consider the spiritual as a support for their intuitions and decisions, it serves more to comfort them than to specifically guide their actions. This corresponds closely with Barendsen and Gardner's (2004) argument that entrepreneurs "believe that they are able to make...change happen (p. 47)." This profile of agency perhaps points to a preoccupation on the part of the workers with their own ability to enact change in the visible world while maintaining a private sense of the global, perhaps invisible and unknowable broader implications of their actions.

In proposing a potential etiology for this attitude to spirituality and work, it is important to consider the social experience of working in self-oriented domains. The social isolation could necessitate the imagination of an expansive spiritual reality to support the worker. That its descriptions lack specific religious terminology and correspond more to popular and New Age spirituality may indicate individuals' lack of exposure to or rejection of organized religious groups and the viability of fashionable non-sectarian models of the divine. While it is difficult to make extensive claims about the spirituality of these individuals, it is nonetheless important to locate their general beliefs within broader societal trends.

Conclusion

Formulating a modern approach to spirituality, twentieth-century theologian Paul Tillich encouraged people to bring an awareness of the spiritual to all parts of their lives, including work, leisure, and friendships (Fuller, 2001, p. 173). Having considered a number of spiritual adaptations – sensing or simply recognizing a higher power, discovering the unknown, and interfacing with a Christian God – one can see not only the subjective and flexible nature of spirituality, but also how personal beliefs impact and alter the human experience in general. The workers introduced in this paper demonstrate the varying degrees to which the divine can thoroughly “sacralize daily life (Wuthnow, 1996, p. 325).”

Domain Analyses

One of the unexpected findings of this research concerns the ways in which types of spirituality correlate strongly within specific domains or alternately, cut across others. Wuthnow (1994) argues that “religious values may encourage people to select occupations in which these values can be realized (p. 45).” Yet as discussed, the experience of the spiritual is a highly salient aspect of occupational life for some people, and it differs across domains. Phenomenologically, actors and musicians envision and experience the spiritual in a much different manner than those in self-oriented domains. The types of spirituality which workers in self-oriented domains experience do not seem to be replicated among scientists. There are a number of potential sources for this pattern, and perhaps some common features of the domains that may support the application of spirituality at work.

First, domain standards delimit and define the type of work that is done, the various forms in which it may take place, and how workers interact with each other and the people they serve. Moreover, in establishing rules of interaction, they strictly circumscribe the role and acceptable behavior of the worker. Such boundaries control the type and extent of his or her experiences and may affect how personal spiritual views can be applied and expressed. Philanthropy professionals would not claim to activate spiritual energy through their activities in a performance simply because they do not perform.

Likewise, actors would not sense God making significant decisions in their jobs because their primary occupational function is to present a good performance. The qualities of a domain seem to delineate individual experience and quite possibly the types of spirituality that may be exhibited or publicly acknowledged.

The domains examined in this paper may simply provide more opportunity to workers to experience the spiritual. As was mentioned previously, business and social entrepreneurship, business more generally, the performing arts, and philanthropy lack some of the constructs that are more rigid in traditional professions, like medicine and law. Such demarcations may limit how a worker applies spiritual concepts to work. Moreover, the domains discussed in this paper are perhaps less hostile to spirituality in general. That is not to suggest that doctors and lawyers cannot imbue spirituality into their work. Surely, many do. Rather, it is perhaps increasingly difficult in domains with more explicit expectations and limitations on worker behavior and that could display hostility toward the ideas.

Another possibility exists. Just as various types of work attract individuals possessing skills and attitudes that are compatible with them, there may be broad, common spiritual inclinations that such people possess or are likely to adopt that overlap with their choice of professional domain. In other words, people could maintain spiritual attitudes or beliefs that are compatible with a specific domain. Such a claim could only be validated through a longitudinal study but would no doubt further clarify the connections between spirituality and work practices.

Implications for GoodWork

Recent scholarship on good work suggests that it emerges at the intersection of personal standards and influences, domain and field expectations, and societal controls (GoodWork Project® Team, 2004). Given the highly personal nature of spirituality, its effect on good work seems limited to the first component. It plays a significant role in shaping a worker's beliefs in his or her ultimate purpose in work and in life, what values to adopt, and how to view the world in general.

As noted previously, many workers draw on religious and spiritual traditions as a source of values. But individuals' accounts suggest that believing in and interacting with a spiritual presence – whether it be the Christian God or an impersonal higher force – may encourage efforts toward good work in a society in which it is increasingly at risk. Those reflecting God-centered spirituality who may feel the immediate presence of God seem to feel strongly supported in their actions, especially as they emulate the ethical model of Christ and envision themselves doing God's good works on earth. Others who believe in a diffuse and benevolent higher power may attempt to do work that is excellent in quality and ethical in an attempt to live in accordance with it and to make its presence active in their lives. Hopes of connecting with the spiritual, not fear of punishment from disobeying ethical codes, may motivate ethical behavior. While believing in the spiritual may not necessarily prompt one to engage in good work, it may serve as a potent factor in how an individual conceptualizes his or her function in the world and the best way to actualize that when at work.

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