

Reframing Faith and Work for Lasting Success

by Laura Nash

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■ ■ ■ Laura Nash

USA Faith and Work Revival

Faith at work is a hot topic these days, robust enough to be called a movement by *New York Times* writer, Russell Shorto, and exotic enough in our supposedly secular culture to be a source of constant interest in the media. According to NBC's Anne Thomson, there are now over 1200 work/faith organizations in the United States. As an example, one website group, Os Hillman's International Coalition of Workplace Ministries and Marketplace Leaders, lists over 900 members, with 80,000 people (not all members) receiving its daily emails. As Reverend Scotty McLennan and I wrote in *Church on Sunday, Work on Monday*¹, there has been a widespread emergence of spirituality in the workplace. Small prayer groups of business people, or religious references in a corporate mission statement, while still a minority cultural trend in the workplace, are no longer as exotic as when I first began studying evangelical CEOs in the early 1990s.²

These trends demonstrate how far the taboo on business's acknowledgement of religion has been lifted. There appears to be a sea change amongst believers inside and outside the church to say of the business person, "Perhaps you are not totally of the evil empire—your work counts, too. Put aside thought of spiritual irrelevance; take your faith to work."

Spiritual need

Despite reservations, I am heartened by the potential for this newly organized interest in faith at work to help sincerely faithful business people seek to correct corporate abuses and better fulfill the humane promises of economic prosperity. But there is also a need to heal a certain *soul sickness* attending work today.

In addition to well-documented feelings of stress and overwork, there is a spiritual hunger in today's business world, as evidenced in words like "lack of passion," "loss of meaning," "loss of my inner core," and especially

in the term "*dispiritedness*" Such terms, which appear frequently in connection with statistics on worker disengagement and active search for another job, often carry a spiritual, if not directly "religious" connotation in the U.S., itself a highly religious nation.³ Work itself appears to be sapping spiritual strength, however one understands that term. A 2001 Gallup poll suggested that 19% of U.S. employees were "actively disengaged" at work, at a cost of \$292 to \$355 billion per year in lost productivity. Of the 7,718 U.S. employed adults aged 18 and over surveyed by Harris Interactive, 33% felt they were at a dead-end in their current job, and 42% "trying to cope with feelings of burnout".⁴

It would not be surprising in the face of such statistics that workers would be seeking forms of active spiritual renewal, whether it be more time with family (a critical indicator of life satisfaction among religiously inclined adults), or emotional fortitude on the job. Indeed, the

spirituality at work book and audio tape industry has exploded since the mid-nineteen nineties. Nonetheless, even in the U.S. the possible convergence of spiritual belief and business activity is a cultural stretch, and it continues to provoke surprise and interest as “news.”⁵



Starbucks's coffee cups carrying Rick Warren's personal wisdom statement. See footnote 5.

Capricious business world

I think the increasing interest and practice of religion at work is a very understandable response to great forces in our business environment today. Modern work is not only tiring; it is unsettling, especially work as we know it today. We live in a commercial world of vast, unstable markets, connected in a global network over which not even a single country has control, never mind an individual. Fuelled by an explosion of technological disruption, which is not the least finished, the world is rendered flat and accessible (to borrow Thomas L. Friedman's metaphor)

but also faceless in terms of social connection. We meet and do business in cyberspace without ever seeing each other over a table. We adopt virtual identities where for entertainment whole universes are created out of collective communication in cyberspace. Who is the real self in such a world?

Economic life is surely more capricious and unpredictable than ever before. In terms of personal well being, instability has many delivery channels, from identity theft to unprecedented rates of job change. Business leadership is also less stable than in the past. Not only have we seen an unprecedented number of CEO blow-ups in the past five years, but simple restlessness—or greed—reinvents institutional life via the corporate merger with increasing speed.

This marketplace instability can be exciting but unpredictability is also scary. Sudden market disruptions on an amazing scale can quickly beach your company. I recently saw a statistic that boggled my mind. The comparatively *tiny* and quite young internet service called MySpace, now in its third year and recently acquired by Rupert Murdoch, already reports 32 million customers from around the world. And yet its headquarters in Santa Monica, California, does not even carry a sign on the door.

MySpace is just one of thousands of demonstrations of a relentless pressure on business people to change, reinvent, and keep ahead of the curve. Combine this pressure with the prospect of

unfamiliar sources of labour competition, or highly complex financial structures that are completely dependent on artificial intelligence for order and accountability, and it is easy to feel the shadow of doom. How to survive as a person in this fast paced world where the jealous god of the marketplace demands your full attention, 24/7?

If doom won't bring you to a spiritual longing for wholeness at work, questions about personal worth will. As I've recently written in *Just Enough*, our culture is one of “never enough,” a world of escalating measures of material success and worth. The American Dream just keeps growing. For the third consecutive year, the rich got richer in absolute terms and compared to the rest of the population of the United States.

It can be difficult to resist buying in to the pressure of feeling you have to perform and consume at genius levels of energy and mogul levels of wealth to be part of the successful business crowd. As businesses push for results that are “nothing short of spectacular” and portray the next quarter goals as a challenging attempt to achieve immortality, reactions are mixed. For some the success on steroids zeitgeist is challenging, for others it is not only exhausting, it devalues their sense of worth on the job. For both, it may seem the inevitable condition of success.

One woman, call her Sharon, reported wryly that she had her nervous breakdown the night she landed a huge client she'd pursued for months. She'd been out to

dinner four nights out of five for the past two weeks to close the deal, and when she got the contract, she called her boss to share the good news. His response was, "TMC, Sharon, TMC. For the uninitiated, that's "Three More Calls", a motivational mantra among many salespeople. Defeated, Sharon wondered, what's it all for? A month later she had started her own business, and one of the first principles she built into her workplace was time for spiritual renewal and reflection, not to mention appreciation of others.



"Three More Calls, Sharon"

FOUR IMPULSES OF FAITH

A review of the spirituality literature, the faith at work movement, and literally several hundred business people suggests four major desires, "impulses of faith", that can be translated into benchmarks of the integrated self at work⁶:

1. To be personally whole while at work. In other words, to stay in touch with the reality of the sacred self, the knowledge of

one's unconditional worth as an individual in spite of inevitable imperfections. It is a sacred *awareness* of an inner-worldly connection to God or God's reality. It is accessed through prayer, meditation, or say, the surprising joyfulness that comes in doing your job well and in serving others effectively.

2. To be ethically whole. The religiously consistent self needs the spiritual capacity to act on principles that conform to the moral rules set down in the Bible and refined by generations of careful thinkers. Given that these were not intended for modern economic life and corporate worlds of today's magnitude, such connections are not only difficult to carry out, they are difficult to understand. Spirituality at work seeks to access the moral forces that support and sustain life through work.

3. To be part of community. By respecting the sacredness of others, approaching them with dignity, and giving of self for their advancement—sometimes referred to as solidarity—the self is more wholly connected to a Christian world view of service and love.

4. To create a world that conforms more closely to one's religious worldview. By this I mean the way one understands the world to be working when it is working right. It is about the rightness or wrongness of the structures and cultures of business. New scientific paradigms demand response from the Christian business person to the way the environment is affected by the flapping of a

butterfly's wings or the damming of a river by a hydroelectric plant.

DIVERGENCIES BETWEEN BUSINESS AND FAITH

These four impulses of faith touch on very different aspects of business life. I thoroughly applaud the search to recover wholeness as part of the preparation and living of this faithful journey of life, but I also have serious questions about how Christians in particular are to approach this goal in a way that allows both the spiritual and business purposes to be served well? How will we structure and pursue the integration of faith at work so that business and the spiritual life of the business person find lasting success?

The idea of wholeness at work or even partial convergence between religion and business is historically difficult in Christianity, which has time and again cast business and an inner-worldly asceticism into polar extremes. Even the most pious business person confronts three critical divergences between capitalism and Christianity:

1. The divergence of *personal roles* in modern economic society
2. The divergence of *principles* as embedded in capitalism and Christianity
3. The divergence of *relational experience*, contrasting the unconditional relationship we have with a loving God and a system of corporate and social hierarchies based on competition, acquisition of wealth, and human ownership.

1. Divergence of personal roles

A business person's role can range from boss to the person being bossed, parent or host to the inner child of God, pillar of the church community and someone doing whatever it takes on the floor of the exchange. For some, the result is a kind of spiritual schizophrenia—sacred experience on Sunday, profane life on Monday. I remember one minister I interviewed reporting his shock when he telephoned a parishioner with whom he'd had many dealings at church. He knew this man as a fair and gracious friend. The minister called the man's business office and the man happened to pick up the phone. "I was shocked," reported the minister, "at the tone of his voice. It was as if he were a total stranger. I had never heard him sound that way."

2. Divergence of capitalist and Christian principles

When Harvard Business School was founded nearly a hundred years ago, the first dean professed an ethos that the school was to equip talented people to seek "a decent profit, made decently." It almost sounds quaint today in light of the hard-hitting strategic approaches of your average global investment bank.

We could spend many evenings exploring the principles of a just and faith-integrated capitalism, and I cannot do this topic justice tonight. I highly recommend CABE's newly published Christian

Principles, supported by my friend Brian Griffiths, as a starting point.⁷

3. Divergence of relationships

An essential question in implementing these principles is the difficult issue of proportionality: at what point and in what proportion do I attend to my own interests after attending to those of others? In today's business world, where the demand is for "nothing short of spectacular", there may seem little room to set a limit on the self-interest of owners or managers.

TYPES OF CHRISTIAN RESPONSE

In past interviews, I discovered certain types of response to this problem of divergence, and you may find these categories useful in testing your own ideas. At one extreme was the *Nihilist*, who simply felt there was no possibility of convergence between faith and business, given the ethical and inter-personal

degenerates into a perverted prosperity gospel: If I'm doing well, I must be doing good. A third type, and far more common than either the Nihilist or Apologist, was the *Generalist*, or *Percolator*. This was the Christian who was confident that his or her faith conformed to business life by some percolating down of grace and good conscience, but could not give a single concrete example of how this was so beyond, perhaps, a decision about sex at work or in advertising. The *Generalist* had what we might call a "thin" faith based work ethic: he seemed to see no inherent divergence in his roles, responsibilities, or conduct of social relationships based on economics and status.

The last type was what I called the *Seeker*, the business person whose faith sheds an inescapable light on the phenomenon of divergence, causing that person to struggle with business as is.

What was interesting to me was how, in so many cases, the Seeker's faith not only put out clear red lights on certain behaviours, it also shed light on a creative solution. It strengthened them to take the risk of thinking about others first and then finding a way to make a decent profit from that standpoint, or offering an alternative lifestyle in order to have a family and remain an effective worker.

If you are serious about faith at work, you will have to come to terms with the three divergences I have mentioned, and I suggest that means becoming a Seeker,



Harvard Business School, Soldiers Field, Boston, Massachusetts

difficulties. This person was countered by the *Apologist*, who feels essentially that God loves the business system and will cancel any little stains on the social fabric with, if not an invisible hand, an invisible eraser. It is a philosophy that easily

one who entertains a healthy but ultimately divergent set of world views that at times distance one from business enough to recover the elements of sacred identity and ethics, but with the fortitude to apply this to business problem solving. Where will this fortitude take you? Are there framing concepts, or prayers, or habits that can help one prepare for this process?

POLARISING WITNESS

I think many business people and their religious counsellors get off on the wrong path as they seek to strengthen faith at work. Essentially, they direct their focus to only one activity of religion: the resurrection of a sacred canopy of religious language and ritual inside the workplace, often for the purposes of conversion and expanded business membership in a fellowship of religious affiliation. Many of the examples of concrete convergence of faith and work turn out to be cut-and-paste jobs to communicate one's religious affiliation to the business public: a mission statement dedicating the company to God, or painting a line from the bible on the side of a delivery truck. Others sponsor chaplaincies for employees or, like Ford Motor Co, a specific office with function of accommodating religious affinity groups on the job. Or they form a lay group outside the workplace that with typical American cheeriness is said to be about making work "faith-friendly".

I want to be careful here. There are many extremely thoughtful lay groups, but on the whole they have displayed a tendency to limit the ways in which we imagine

faith at work. If the faith at work movement continues to take member-solicitation and canopy-erecting activities as their first, and possibly only focus, it will backfire. The faith at work effort will simply collapse into a spiritual shopping mall based on sectarian differences, lifestyle marketing and therapeutic services. Instead of integration of faith and work, it will create segregation of the workplace on the lines of different faiths.

Many people perceive the prayer group at the office as a hostile act of exclusion; they respond to an invocation to do it Jesus's way as religious bullying. The courts appear to agree. The CEO of a trucking company in the Midwest sent tape-recorded messages to employees quoting Colossians 3:22-23 ("Servants, obey in everything those who are your earthly masters."). He added his own interpretation that clients were their earthly masters for the day. Three employees who received these daily messages had enough and sued in court, claiming that they had not been hired to say prayers, but to manage freight. They won a six figure judgment.

This example of good intentions gone horribly astray shows us that sectarianism is the *last* thing the business culture will tolerate. Today's geo-political environment has made fears of polarization more palpable as fundamentalist agendas threaten the flow of goods and services for rich and poor alike, throughout the world. James Q. Wilson and Alan Wolfe recently discussed this problem at the Tanner lectures at Harvard.

What they both agreed upon was that people in the US are tired of polarizing rhetoric, and are looking for leaders who can support the religious element of modern life without polarizing the population.

CATALYTIC WITNESS

I would like to suggest two other types of religious, or spiritual, activity that I believe are more suited to the integration of faith in one's work and the corporate environment. What is more, we see many examples of such activity in business today.

1. Personal practice

The first is the private, personalized practice of faith as a catalyst for accessing spiritual awareness. This can readily be

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distinguished from member-forming or proselytizing activities. Examples would be a moment of private prayer, or the practice of meditation during lunch hour, the exercise of conscience. I call these "catalytic" expressions of religion because they reawaken various forms of "sacred awareness", from the self-confidence of being reminded of God's love to the ethical fortitude of obeying religious precepts in our stewardship of resources and lives. There are also external catalysts of faith that can be distinguished from proselytizing in communities of free religious expression: wearing a personal

symbol, such as a cross, or bracelet, or headscarf or yarmulke; placing an icon or symbol of faith somewhere in your office space.

2. Universal language

Another, more easily shared formed of catalytic faith is the appeal to universal language and principles. To a degree, this is a disguised language. It differs from deceit in that it tries to negotiate a partial buying in to the content of one's faith: say the ethics but not the membership or confessional aspects of Christianity. Say I am the head of a bank, a Christian, and would like to make it clear how to treat poor couples who apply for a loan. If I want my employees to follow the same ethic as mine, must I appeal to Jesus to make the point? Would that be likely to make the

There is, at best, a state of détente between church and business professionals

point more forcefully than a generalized appeal to fair play and customers' interests first?

I think the latter, more universalized language is more effective at operationalizing the CEO's faith not only on loan policy but in creating an ethical corporate community. Nor does it rule out convergence of faith and work at a personal level.

There is a deeper function that laity can serve in service of their faith and the business community: respecting and supporting the business person in his or her struggle with the forces of

divergence. I think it is here, in private relationship, not polarizing espousals, that we see the greatest opportunities for robust intrusions of faith into business worldview, and that well-informed lay groups with a firm bias toward the catalytic rather than proselytizing forms of religious activity can help.

3. Informed bible study

But religion is not just about personal techniques of prayer or emotional states of compassion. It is also about the assertion of generalized statements of a worldview, the cosmic order that explains the way the world works when it is working right. This is the third major form of religious practice open to the business person: the study of wisdom literature and its interpretation of the orders of a world working right, whether from an ethical standpoint, or an ecological one—with application to business contexts. *Informed* study of these texts has not been the most visible characteristic of the faith at work groups which I have seen.

A fourth Divergence: Divergence of faith

Here we face the fourth major difficulty of convergence between faith and work: the radical difference of worldview between the institutional leaders in religion and business. As Scotty McLennan and I discovered in our research, there is, at best, a state of détente between church and business professionals and it is not transforming the experience of faith into an operational

approach to business's soul sickness. We found that as business leaders and religious leaders contemplated each other's legitimacy to interpret and address the problems of faith at work, each side seemed to resent the other. They don't know what they're talking about. *They* don't understand.

We found that religious professionals tended to approach business problems from a negative, subtractive standpoint: wealth creation was assumed as a given, and the challenge of faith was to redistribute the wealth away from those who had too much by the rules of the secular game. Business people took a positive, additive view: faith was about expanding economic opportunity for more people through business success. For the business person, business was about solving problems and creating prosperity, and it centered on specific activities. For the clergy, business was about macro concepts like markets, materialism, and the policies of nation-states. Faith was about taking a psychological stand with the poor and suffering, while for the business person it was about creating a prosperous Jerusalem. Action informed by faith for the business person was about supporting people, creating new opportunity, acting generously on a contract. For the clergy, faith-based action was about stopping evil practices in business, which was an assertion of justice.

I think it is critical for well-trained, theologically thoughtful religious professionals to become

a positive resource to the business person who is seeking to be a faithful steward in the workplace.

Experiment, not a single doctrine

You will perhaps be disappointed that I have not posited an overarching theoretical statement of a solution to the divergence problems of faith and capitalism, nor even a set of hard and fast rules for the creation of a just and religiously tolerant corporate environment. I can only justify my remarks by appealing to a fascinating book called *The Logic of Failure*, by Dietrich Dorner, published in 1998. He ran a series of experiments with academic experts who were instructed to solve problems for a series of computer simulated environments. Those who did worst relied on a fixed theoretical approach, setting a simple linear course of intended cause and effect. They did not correct course when errors were first detected, and blamed others for failures in the systems.

Dorner's research confirms me in the opinion that the process of being whole in a changing disruptive workplace will never be solved by a single, absolutist doctrinal principle nor by assuming only one persona in

modern life that will suffice to express who we are. The search for faith at work must be experimental and multi-faceted, drawing on various forms of catalytic spirituality and wisdom tradition, from ethical precepts to humanizing uses of power.

CONCLUSION

Ultimately, however, the four great divergences that I have mentioned will pose a continual prospect of paradox for the faithful, both in the practice and experience of modern business life. Business will never be a heaven on earth, and God's ultimate order can never be fully captured in human institutions. To respond well to these divergent measures, relational rules and worldviews, the business person must be practiced at dynamic balancing, i.e.

exercising proportionality in the pursuit of profit, service of others, long-term and short-term goods, and even in making time for self-sustaining activities of renewal and pleasure. The greatest skill will be the exercise of proportionality, the ability to anticipate multiple needs and set the "just enough" for each.

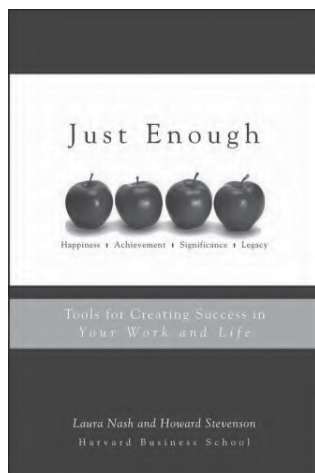
The business person of faith, poised for imperfect but earnest action in the halls of commerce, must constantly switch between divergent measures and principles

about profit, people, and personal time. For the recovery of a wholly faithful self and a faithful business life, the business person needs courage and emotional balance to achieve the tangible exercise of "just enough" in setting business tasks for now and the future. Prayer, fellowship, the study of the bible and other wisdom texts as well as secular knowledge on goal setting and value creation—all these will be robust resources for finding that courage and balance. ■

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Notes

- 1 Reviewed in *Faith in Business* 7:4 p.23-25.
- 2 *Believers in Business*, Thomas Nelson, 1994
- 3 Despite America's fairly constant and relatively high rate of religiosity over the years, (consistently between 94 to 98% of the population profess a belief in God), between 1984 and 1998 the number of people who said they felt a need for greater spiritual growth in their life jumped from 56 percent to 82 percent. The figure dropped to 78 percent in 2000. Of these, 72% understood spirituality in a personal sense rather than a search for organized religion. Source: The Gallup Organization.
- 4 Harris Interactive, poll conducted between June 2 and 16, 2004. Similarly, the Spherion Emerging Workforce Study of GenXers (25-40), published in December 2005, found that 33 % percent of U.S. workers between the ages of 25 and 39 feel burned out by their jobs, and 40 % intend to find a new job in the next 12 months.
- 5 This is illustrated by the media fuss surrounding a 'personal wisdom statement' from mega-church pastor Rick Warren appearing on one of Starbuck's coffee cups.
- 6 For a full discussion of this research and findings, see *Church on Sunday, Work on Monday*, chapter 2, pages 40-69.
- 7 *Principles for Those in Business* is available from CAFE via their website www.cafe-online.org



■ *Just Enough* by Laura Nash & Howard Stevenson, John Wiley 2005, £11.99 ■