

Spirituality in Business: Money in Exchange or New Business Paradigm?

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Spirituality is subject to the same destiny as a coin: having been introduced into common use and remaining there for a long time, it has lost its original effigy, favoring so the use of substitutive tokens which counterfeiters don't have any difficulty in multiplying. (André Dodin, Grande Dizionario delle Religioni)

The annual SPES (Spirituality in Economics and Society) conference, held at the University of Leuven on September 21-22, was dedicated this year to the topic of the European identity in business and social ethics. In his opening talk ever-inspiring Prof. Zamagni undertook the ambitious task to answer the question: What constitutes the “soul of Europe”? According to the Bolognese professor, encounters between three couples of elements, or better, categories that seem to be irreconcilable, provide the key to that question.

As a result of the “clash” between the first couple of categories - individual and society – the European culture coined the concept of person, to overcome limits of both individualism and collectivism. The second couple of categories “liberty and equality”, ‘foe sisters’ as Bergson called them, are reconciled through the notion of democracy. Finally, the notions of national identity and universality constitute the third couple of categories where the merging role would be played by the idea of fraternity, enabling the existence of equality and diversity (Prof. Zamagni reminded that it is not to be confused with difference). Thus, according to the Italian professor, “person, democracy, and fraternity are three key words filling the European identity space”. Unfortunately, they are becoming more and more controversial and even obsolete today, and thus need urgent rejuvenation.

One of the fruits of such a European identity in business and economy is the idea of civil economy, developed between the XI-XIV centuries. Its perspective brings out an alternative approach to the responsibility of the firm, complementing and enriching the widespread (nowadays Anglo-

American) version of CSR. As Prof. Zamagni supposes Europe may offer the alternative idea of civil economy and corporate *civil* responsibility where we do not put right the consequences of the actions of the corporate agent (one of the reminiscences of the feudal society, according to Mill) but rather cure the problem at its root by constituting different, unconventional types of enterprise, such as fair trade companies, cooperatives, social enterprises etc. Unfortunately, examples of such civilly responsible companies built on the principles of the dignity of the human person, democratic government and fraternity remain a marginal phenomenon, raising many questions regarding their sustainability. If we want to preserve the European identity in business, it is important, then, to unite our efforts in changing the setting in which such firms find themselves constrained to function and which was not designed for them.

Break-out sessions were dedicated more specifically to the issue of spirituality in business, its general understanding and approaches to its analysis. While there is no doubt that the rhetoric of spirituality is becoming more and more popular in all spheres of the social sciences, probably mainly as a reaction to the strong presence of materialism in modern Western culture, its use in the business domain remains usually vague and fuzzy. This probably explains why session papers covered such different approaches and perspectives: from the personalism of Rosmini (Carlos Hoewel) to Bahá-inspired leadership (Daniel Schaubacher), from the idea of the common (Helen Alford, Yuliya Shcherbinina) to Vedanta spirituality (Gerrit Broekstra), and from Catholic Social Teaching (Daniel Deak) to Hindu and Buddhist business ethics (Gerrit De Vylder).

Most papers presented during the break-out session treated the definitional issue of spirituality as if it were something well-known, thus to be omitted, and its positive benefits as if they were something widely-recognized. The problem, however, persists and constitutes, in Alford's and Shcherbinina's opinion, a serious obstacle on the

way to giving distinctiveness to the idea of spirituality, making it workable and giving it explanatory power. In fact, until recently the terms “spiritual” and “religious” were synonyms, connoting a belief in a higher power of some kind and a desire to deepen one’s connection with that power through rituals, practices and daily moral behaviour. It is only in the twentieth century that spirituality has started to be considered a “privatized religion”: more inclusive (embracing many nature-centred, non-theist and even secular conceptions) and pluralistic, as well as less institutionalised. Thus, it produces a false and unproductive contraposition between religion and spirituality where the first is viewed as bad, “restricting and inhibiting human potential”, and the second as good, “speaking to the greatest of human capacities”. This, however, is not the only reason to be cautious about the use of the language of spirituality.

Today we witness the description of spirituality in highly pluralistic terms as a search for meaning, connectedness and inner wholeness. The use of such notions as God, for example, is not advised, since it would be criticized as exclusively Christian or theistically-centred. It is clear that such “pluralism”, instead of enriching, borders on conceptual emptiness, offering “supermarket spirituality”, in the words of Waaijman, where spirituality includes everything to everybody’s liking, according to personal interpretation and personal ways in which it may be experienced. From one side, it proves the “universality” of the language of spirituality, allowing it to reach out to almost everybody in a very compelling personal way¹, for it speaks to everyone about something.² Given this binding force of spirituality, its effect will be undoubtedly important for the adoption of CSR but less useful for theorizing about CSR. At the same time, it requires a high level of subjectivity, making it an exclusively individual phenomenon, a so-called “self-spirituality”. It becomes, thus, another self-help means to the “project of the self”, teaching how to reach *self-fulfilment*, *self-actualisation*, or, in the work domain, how to become a better leader or manager. No wonder it is difficult to objectify and categorize an idea that is, in its essence, subjective and individual.

The discourse of spirituality becomes even more complicated when it is done not at the individual but at the organizational level. First of all, the pursuit of profit and the continued

acquisition of wealth way beyond physical need conflict with the traditional spirituality of all types. Thus, there are two possible ways: either to move towards one of the vague, all-embracing readings of spirituality that appeal to ultimate values without specifying what they are, or to restrict its use only in reference to the spirituality of the company’s founders, which often gives a push to the organization in the direction of fulfilling ethical and moral obligations. In fact, Ben & Jerry’s and The Body Shop are two frequently cited examples where history, values and CSR practices were influenced by the spiritual principles of the founders. And even though there are no doubts that spirituality reinforces our commitment to putting our values into effect, and may be a powerful source of quality for the individual, organization or even for society, there are so far significant theoretical barriers to drawing up a general spiritual-based model as an ethical framework for all the companies.

The meeting ended with a panel discussion which gathered together both practitioners and consultants that shared their understanding of the meaning of spirituality and spiritual programmes and practices launched in concrete business contexts. While Diana Schumacher, vice-president of the Environmental Law Foundation, outlined her understanding of spirituality in business through the concept of “whole work”, i.e. work designed so that all its beneficial social and technical features are optimised, Frans de Clerck pointed to the practice of Triodos Bank Group (where he is a Senior Adviser to the Executive Board) to gather once a month a “spiritual forum” where employees may share their personal stories. This practice together with the ethical approach to finance (so called “banking on values”), - according to which money is not neutral, but involves responsibilities from its inception and along the banking distribution chain creating added value (financial, human, social and environmental) - helps to feed money processes and financial systems with basic values and to counter their uncontrollable undesirable development.

NOTE:

¹ As Hans Küng stresses, ethics should be firmly rooted in religion, otherwise there is no binding force for following it.

² Going even further, we may say that, in a way, it reveals that human beings experience spiritual longing by nature.