LEADERSHIP, INNOVATION, AND SPIRITUALITY:
A BOOK REVIEW
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In *Leadership, Innovation, and Spirituality* (2014, Patrick Nullens & Jack Barentsen, Editors, Peeters Press), the authors from the Institute of Leadership and Ethics ambitiously set out to initiate interdisciplinary, scholarly dialogue between leaders from various spiritual and religious backgrounds, and leaders in the field of leadership studies. This pursuit is significant because, with few exceptions, scholars of leadership and scholars of theological traditions rarely possess the capacity to find enough deep common ground to produce rich dialogue that responsibly represents both disciplines. The work is foundational, rather than exhaustive, creating the potential for a new reality in research and dialogue. It is divided into three sections, moving from one end of the spectrum (the need for spirituality in the discipline of leadership and business studies) to the other (theological perspectives of spirituality in the work context), with interdisciplinary dialogue hemming the two sides together in the center.

I. PART ONE: THE NEED FOR SPIRITUAL LEADERSHIP AT WORK

Heinkens opens the discussion with “Impasse of Leadership” (p. 15), in which he describes the holistic challenges of contemporary organization in terms of an ecosystem defined by the inter-relationships of three forces: Business (B), Society (S), and the Individual (I). Both B-I and B-S relationships fall into a spectrum of dynamics that range from being defined by being disconnected and survival-focused, to being focused on a larger purpose and focused on world impact. When members experience B-I and B-S dynamics that are higher up on the spectrum (level 3 - committed or level 4 - larger purpose), their motivation to contribute is found to become intrinsic, and their commitment to the work, the organization, or both, piques. Based on these findings,
Heinkens proposes a re-invention of the relationship between employees and the organizations to which they belong. The optimized relationship would enable members to “discover and live their vocation” (p. 29) and foster a culture of intrinsic motivation.

Heinkens debunks the idea that inspirational professions monopolize the capacity for intrinsically motivated workers. “I have seen many people wanting to switch profession in order to make ‘the world a better place,’ without actually realizing how much their current organization allows them to do just that. In the end, individuals are forced to focus on the ultimate question: ‘who am I, what is my purpose?’” (p. 29). Understanding vocation requires understanding the essence of fundamental mission. When mission is hyper-contextualized, the context can be mistaken for the calling. Heinkens’ re-framing of the concept of mission in terms of the B-S-I ecosystem enables the underlying “common ethic” behind all three to emerge.

In “Search for Spirituality in the Business World,” Stuart and Lin discuss how organizations can benefit greatly from spirituality, which expands engagement with workplace members beyond what they produce. Spirituality engages members as human beings, and can address their physical, mental, emotional, cognitive, and spiritual needs. However, defining, implementing, and measuring spirituality in the workplace is a challenge. Distinguishing religion from spirituality as separate constructs is necessary to maintain research integrity, but how does one define the operant relationship between the two? “While the possibility of a universal understanding of spirituality apart from individual religions has its appeal... it seems reasonable to assume that a theoretical understanding of spirituality also involves an understanding of the practices and beliefs of the religion with which it is connected” (p. 37). In short, people’s religion frames their approach to spirituality, so prudent leaders may want to “observe and reflect on the interaction between [their] own religion and spirituality” (p. 37), find the spiritual common ground held by other members of the organization, and build upon it.

II. PART 2: INTERDISCIPLINARY REFLECTIONS ON SPIRITUAL LEADERSHIP AT WORK

In Chapter 3, “Spirituality and the Psychology of Leadership Credibility” (p. 41), Van Saan further addresses the challenge(s) surrounding attempts to nail down a universally acceptable definition of leadership and spirituality in a world bombarded with divergent and conflicting approaches and assumptions related to the terms. Without dismissing the inherent interconnectedness between worldview, religion, and spirituality, van Saan proposed a broad definition of spirituality, as: “an attitude of openness, attention, and consciousness” (p. 47). This definition presents spirituality as the cognitive, affective, and behavioral dimensions of an unending journey toward integration. It encompasses growth and development in human relationships, inner cohesion, and transcendent understanding. Emphasis is placed on meaning-making and wholeness, a unification of all three levels of human functioning, in every context including work. A leader’s multidimensional integration of meaning (personally and organizationally), van Saan contends, creates leadership credibility: “Credible leadership should be dedicated to integration, aimed at sustainable perspectives for individual and global realities. Leadership should be based on spirituality in order to
obtain this integration” (p. 56). By this definition, “spirituality” promotes self-integration and transparency, which is consistent with the biblical desire for authenticity (Psalm 139) and is consistent with a myriad of religious and philosophical systems. Though from a Christocentric perspective this approach ignores the potential for conflicting trajectories between members’ spiritual journeys may emerge when practicing members of radically different belief systems work together. The possibility of a sustainable, universally acceptable definition for spirituality in a religiously diverse workplace therefore remains in question, although this chapter valiantly deepens the discussion and expands potential for future research.

Verkerk discusses the inherent challenges of spiritual integration for leaders from an organizational standpoint, in “Spirituality, Organization, and Leadership: Towards a Philosophical Foundation of Spirituality at Work” (p. 57). Verkerk found definitions and approaches to spirituality in the workplace to be conflicting and vast: “The failure to agree on the meaning of key terms points to a lack of shared theoretical foundation” (p. 58). This is a critical point. If fundamental differences regarding the purpose of the spiritual journey exist, shared terms cannot translate into shared meanings, and expanding research cannot gain optimal momentum. From the collective findings, Verkerk identifies four themes a working philosophical model on workplace spirituality must possess: “(a) organizational performance, (b) organization as community, (c) idea of meaningful work, (d) spiritual experiences of the individual, and (e) transcendence” (p. 62), implying the need for perspectives of both individual and organization to be addressed in any philosophical model.

Contending that practice demonstrates held and operant belief in any system, Verkerk proposes a structural, contextual, and directional practice model as a framework for theoretical analysis of workplace spirituality, examining three stories from personal experience. The study demonstrated that this practice model is effective for use in identifying where organizations bound the shaping forces of spirituality, enabling discovery of how religious or ideological beliefs and values impact spirituality (both individually and collectively) as individuals are embedded in organizational contexts. In the stories, constant exchanges between the four emergent themes and their impact on one another were evident. For example, in the third story, Verkerk valued the Genesis 1 and 2 cultural mandate to bring God's creation under His reign by orchestrating order and wholeness in contemporary society. However, upon becoming a manager, “I did not know how to implement these ideas in practice” (p. 74) until exposed to the lectures of De Sitter, who “connected the design of organizations to questions of meaning” (p. 74). De Sitter’s integrative approach demonstrates how “the laws of God in creation could be exposed in such a way that meaningful labor was possible for employees on the shop floor” (p. 74). Verkerk's practice-based model provides the necessary framework to observe the intimate intersection and interaction of these four identified dimensions of spirituality in the workplace in a manner that adjusts to each unique context. This approach significantly contributes to new potential for constructive research and dialogue within the field.
III. PART 3: THEOLOGICAL PERSPECTIVES ON SPIRITUAL LEADERSHIP AT WORK

In “Spirituality as a Source of Inspired, Authentic, and Innovative Leadership” (p. 81), Johan Verstraeten articulates how the mission of God is meant to be enacted in the practical life of leaders by creating meaning for the organization and its members. Since ethics are the behavioral expression of what we perceive to be meaningful, Verstraeten contends, the challenge of contemporary organizations is meaninglessness rather than ethics. This meaninglessness, rooted in contemporary hyper-domination of management nomenclature in leadership discourse, has led to organizational efficiency measured in narrow terms of productivity and usefulness. Organizations so narrowly expressed become efficient but inhuman, defined by a culture of mistrust and a fear of creativity or taking risk.

Through fostering narrative sources and attentive listening, Verstraeten asserts that spiritual leaders enable the members to see things in new, meaningful ways, creating a culture of openness and appreciation of self and others: “All that we do has coherence and a deeper dimension. All that we do is part of the great process of the humanization and completion of the world….via our daily professional activities…we decide about the future of the world and the quality of life” (p. 92). According to Verstraeten, this meaning-making approach to spiritual leadership empowers leaders to transcend anxieties related to management and control, enabling them to grow in discernment, openness, receptivity, and willingness to be vulnerable. Perhaps the most critical impact of Verstraeten’s contribution is the bold prophetic missional undertones of this approach. The Genesis 1-2 mandate to bring the mission of God to bring His blessing and order into the workplace shatters the assumption that sacred and secular are fundamentally incompatible, suggesting instead that the workplace is a necessary context for (especially biblical) spirituality, and hungry for an infusion of spirit. Reminiscent of Chris Wright’s (2010) assertion that “if everything is mission…everything is mission” (p. 26), Verstraeten’s chapter lays the foundation for future research to examine where and missiology, practical theology, and leadership studies converge for the Christocentric leader in the workplace.

Verstraeten’s conclusions naturally set up Patrick Nullens’ contribution, “Leadership Spirituality as Participating in Christ Offices as King, Prophet, and Priest” (p. 99). Closing the great divide between Christian spirituality and leadership in the public arena, Nullens calls out trends of popular Christian leadership books toward heretical approaches, including Pelagianism (belief that man’s own efforts can save him), which inclines adherents toward spiritualized formulaic behavioral approaches, and Gnosticism (radical dualism setting spiritual and physical realms at war with one another), which encourages essential withdrawal from meaningful engagement with the world on a spiritual level. “Both common errors have some truth in them, but are ultimately the unfortunate result of theological shallowness, and even worse, a deviation from authentic Christianity” (p. 102). Nullens takes the boldest stance toward a Christocentric approach to spirituality in the entire book, first by stating that spirituality’s purpose is “serving the other, [rather than] transcending self” (p. 103), and then by drawing upon Bonhoeffer’s teachings, to insist that
our spirituality and ethics should be based on an event, the *entering* of God into the reality of this world in Jesus Christ. God should not be understood metaphysically, but as revealed in the coming of Christ in this world.... Our spirituality is a response to the invitation of Christ to participation in this actual reality. (p. 104)

The Christian leader is therefore an active participant in the physical leadership of Christ on earth, which cannot be reduced to merely a mystical reality; it is the concrete service of “being-there-for-the-other” (p. 105), in Christ-like ways. Nullens limits the discussion to three chief offices of Christ as king, prophet, and priest, demonstrating how Christ-following leaders embody spiritual leadership in the workplace by advocating for justice and wise guidance (king), communicating clear vision (prophet), and expressing compassion and empathy to create community (priest). The chapter reinforces the depth and richness that a Christological, Christocentric standard for spiritual leadership as a physical demonstration of the kingdom of God at work on the earth contributes to this field of study.

Finally, Barentsen balances the praise for further study in spiritual leadership with warnings of its darker side, in “A Call to Faithfulness: The Ambivalence of Spirituality as a Source of Innovation” (p. 119). Though spiritual leadership has the capacity to inspire others and shape organizational culture, it can also produce “near-messianic expectations from leaders as spiritual guides, a form of idolatry that uncritically opens itself up to spiritual abuse” (p. 119). Since “leadership is inherently spiritual” (p. 139), Barentsen closes with the challenge to remain mindful of spirituality’s potentially devastating impact, countering it by remaining faithful to God, humanizing/de-glorifying leaders, and setting mindful limits on leaders’ power in every dimension (social, spiritual, financial, etc.), because leaders’ power impacts the leaders spiritually, as well.

IV. CONCLUSION

This collection of writings is one of the most robust attempts to create a space for rich, scholarly dialogue on the topic of spiritual leadership with interdisciplinary focus and a distinctly Christian lens in contemporary study. It lays the foundation for future research in this field with depth and more-than-cursory attention to the richness and complexity surrounding examination of the subject through theological, psychological, sociological, missiological, Christological lenses, juxtaposed with the lenses of leadership and business. The challenges surrounding the undertaking were immense, and the authors set an appropriately high bar for future studies while stoking the imagination with potential. If this is the direction of future study in the field of spiritual leadership (and of the Institute of Leadership and Ethics), the great chasm between “sacred” and “secular” fields of study have the potential to dissolve, and the study of leadership may once again become the interdisciplinary, missional pursuit it has been throughout history.
References
