



Cultivate Wise Christian Leaders Through *wu-wei* in an AI-Driven World

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Abstract

This study drew on a comprehensive body of literature on *wu-wei*, artificial intelligence (AI) social-technological systems, and three decades of reflective practice in higher education and business to examine how Christian business educators can prepare students for wise leadership in an era of AI-driven transformative innovation. It argued that integrating *wu-wei* – the Taoist principle of effortless action – into Christ-centered AI ethics offers wisdom for leadership formation, cultivating epistemological flexibility, vulnerability, and humility. These qualities enable leaders to ethically navigate many disruptive changes, uphold Kingdom values, and envision alternative ecosystems that advance human flourishing, while fostering spiritual growth and critical digital literacy. Through the practice of *wu-wei*, leaders develop the capacity to intuitively discern essential elements of complex situations and seek synergy with patience and being fully present. They also experience the ideal state of effortless action or “flow” in their performance. They deepen self-awareness and collective consciousness for Christ’s Kingdom, grounding wisdom in cultivated humility, meekness of demeanor, and openness of mind to the Holy Spirit.

Keywords: Christ-centered AI ethics, *wu-wei*, epistemological flexibility, collective consciousness, synergy

Artificial intelligence (AI) innovation brings both significant opportunities and profound risks (Acemoglu, 2024; Cazzaniga et al., 2024; Cerutti et al., 2025; Crawford, 2021; Holmström & Carroll, 2024; Klinova, 2024; Lam, 2024b; Maslej et al., 2024; United Nations, 2025; World Economic Forum, 2024, 2025). AI can be deployed on a large scale and great speed without understanding the impact of AI on current social norms and human values (Hinton, 2023a, 2023b; Russell, 2019, 2022; Zewe, 2022). As AI models grow larger and more complex, while frequently repeating similar mistakes, many AI scientists demand stronger oversight, human control, and broad stakeholder engagement (Goel et al., 2025).

AI is bounded to particular epistemologies (Bommasani et al., 2024; Maslej et al., 2023; Sheikh et al., 2023). It generally focuses on the economics of scale, economic prosperity, and maximizing selected notions of expected utility at the expense of human dignity and local communities (Couldry & Mejias, 2019; Tacheva & Ramasubramanian, 2023). AI's algorithm cannot fully capture the depth and complexity of human consciousness (Chalmers, 1995). AI has already been found to create epistemic injustice and make many bad decisions (Eubanks, 2018; Fricker, 2007). Thus, overreliance on AI will erode potential leaders' capability to make wise judgement in addressing complex problems and appraise the particularity of the situation that is not described by existing pretrained data sets in AI. Potential leaders must develop their refined capacities to make judgments in circumstances with ambiguities, conflicting values, and surprises that are beyond boundaries set by AI epistemology mechanism. This is the research question: In what ways can Christian business educators effectively prepare students to become wise leaders who integrate diverse epistemological frameworks across contexts, create synergy with circumstances, and uphold Christian values while fostering spiritual growth?

Current Christ-centered AI ethics frameworks provide valuable guidance for serving the common good, upholding human dignity, and reflecting Kingdom values in both design and application of AI (Burdett, 2023; Sullivan, 2025). For example, DELTA framework (i.e., dignity, embodiment, love, transcendence, and agency) guides us how to honor human dignity and respect the sacredness of human presence when AI is developed and used (Sullivan, 2025). With these Christ-centered principles, leaders and emerging leaders can respect human dignity; safeguard public trust; and advance societal interests, planetary sustainability, and shared social responsibility (Dignum, 2022; Floridi et al., 2022; Tasioulas, 2022). However, given the need for multiple epistemologies, conscious engagement, and synergy with rapid changing realities in making wise decisions, I propose enriching existing Christian AI ethics frameworks by integrating insights from Eastern wisdom traditions, such as the principle of *wu-wei* (i.e., effortless action).

Wu-wei entails an ideal state characterized by skillfulness and moral integrity. It embodies a sense of effortless action – either acting or not acting. This idea is linked to existing literature on mindfulness, the flow experience, neuroscience, and spiritual growth (Barrett, 2011; Chia & Holt, 2007; Csikszentmihalyi, 1990; Slingerland, 2000). *Wu-wei* is a phenomenology of individuals who perform effortlessly and spontaneously while acting on knowledge aligned with the *Way* and *De* (Chia & Holt, 2007; Slingerland, 2000). *Wu-wei* will help leaders to unlearn and empty out the knowledge they may glean from AI (Eshelman et al., 2012; Vaill, 1989). This state of *wu-wei* is also described as “flow” in Csikszentmihalyi's (1990) empirical studies on optimal professional experience. “The *wu-wei* attitudes of seeking synergy, patience, acceptance

of emergent events, and embedding oneself in situations rather than abstracting oneself from them are essential for effective performance” (Vaill, 1989, p. 188).

Wu-wei is often described as a water-like leadership style, embodying the Daoist principle of effortless action (Auzoult, 2021). It encourages leaders to immerse themselves in the natural flow of events, practicing active nonaction – an intentional form of responsiveness rather than passivity. Leaders guided by *wu-wei* accept themselves and others without judgment, embracing authenticity and harmony. They embody the rhythms of nature within their leadership, where tranquility and emptiness serve as foundations for spontaneous, effective action. Such integration with Christian AI ethics framework and *wu-wei* calls Christian business educators to cultivate presence, awe, and gratitude among our students when they can experience God’s presence amid life’s complexities in their embodied knowledge.

This paper argues that when leaders embrace *wu-wei*, a Taoist principle of effortless action that fosters epistemological flexibility, vulnerability, and humility, they will develop collective consciousness and spiritual resilience for Christ Kingdom (Auzoult, 2021). With the increasing self-awareness and collective consciousness, Christian leaders will undergo a relational transformation and become more Christ-like. They are encouraged to envision alternative ecosystems that promote human flourishing while enhancing their critical digital literacy. In this paper, I build on extensive literature reviews about *wu-wei*, AI social-technological systems, and reflections on my 30 years of leadership development in higher education and business (Lam, 2011, 2024a, 2024c). This article proceeds with three sections: (a) *wu-wei* philosophy and *wu-wei* management as a metaphor, (b) the relationship between *wu-wei* and Christ-centered AI ethical framework, and (c) *wu-wei* practices that cultivate wise Christ-centered leaders.

***Wu-Wei* Philosophy and *Wu-Wei* Management as a Metaphor**

The concept of *wu-wei* is somewhat ineffable. *Wu-wei* can be a process and represents an ideal moral and spiritual state of being where the practitioner attains perfect skills to cope with various situations and perform effortlessly and spontaneously, as valued in traditional Chinese culture (Barrett, 2011). “*Wu-wei* embodies the perfection of a unique and ultimate skill: the skill of becoming a fully realized human being and embodying the *Way* in all actions” (Slingerland, 2003, p. 9). Barrett (2011) described *wu-wei* as “a special kind of action and a way of life based on the regular practice of that kind of action: an effortless way of comporting oneself in the world with supreme harmony or efficacy” (p. 681). *Wu-wei* can be characterized by four key elements: (a) fine-tuned responsiveness and skill, (b) nondeliberative spontaneity, (c) effortlessness, and (d) enjoyment. The idea of *wu-wei* wisdom is a form of learned ignorance and is one unlearning traditional Eastern wisdom. It is attained by “emptying out” or “unlearning” (Chia & Holt, 2007).

People can realize their potential without losing their human abilities, control, and responsibilities when they are aligned with the *Way* and *De* in all actions, including AI and human collaboration tasks (Chia & Holt, 2007; Slingerland, 2000). Yearley (1996) noted that perfectly executed and skillful activities in *wu-wei* correspond to the traits of flow described by Csikszentmihalyi (1990) and his colleagues (Nakamura & Csikszentmihalyi, 2002). These traits relate to what Nakamura and Csikszentmihalyi (2002) considered an optimal experience and include (a) intense and focused concentration on the task at hand; (b) merging of action and awareness; (c) loss of reflective self-consciousness; (d) sense of control, or more accurately, a complete absence of anxiety; (e) distorted sense of time; and (f) an experience of the activity as intrinsically rewarding (autotelic experience). The flow experience ultimately depends on the individual's perspective, their interests, abilities, and focus of attention. The subjective quality of this flow experience plays a significant role in determining the psychological well-being of the individual.

Wu-wei is an ideal harmonious state, embodying the paradox of virtue, which revolves around the fact that virtue can only be acquired by someone who is not consciously trying to acquire it. Slingerland (2000) cited Jean-Francois Billeter's definition of *wu-wei* as a state of "perfect knowledge of the reality of the situation, perfect efficaciousness, and the realization of a perfect economy of energy" (p. 300). *Wu-wei* can refer to the state of the mind of the actor. It does not refer to observable actions themselves. It is about the phenomenological state of the doer and the spiritual state of the doer at the moment of action. *Wu-wei* represents the perfection of a unique and ultimate skill – the skill of becoming a fully realized human being and embodying the *Way* in all actions. Thus, *wu-wei* should be seen as a spiritual ideal when a being is harmonized with the objective and normal order of the cosmos. Slingerland described that for a person in *wu-wei*:

proper conduct follows as instantly and spontaneously as the nose responds to a bad smell, with the same unconscious ease and joy with which the body moves to the rhythm of a song. This state of harmony integrates complex cognitive and somatic elements, involving the body, emotions, and mind. Unlike instinctual or habitual actions, *wu-wei* requires a high degree of concentration and allows for considerable flexibility of response (p. 300).

Wu-wei management serves as a metaphor for "a kind of non-principled, non-justified, unthought-out, and non-calculated action" (Vaill, 1989, p. 182). It allows our consciousness to operate as an integral part of our circumstances (Vaill, 1989, p. 183). *Wu-wei* practitioners or doers seek to "maintain the unity of time, the unity of thought and action, and the unity of self and environment" (Vaill, 1989, p. 186). The *wu-wei* attitude emphasizes qualities essential for effective performance, including the search for synergy, patience, acceptance of emergent events, and the tendency to immerse

oneself in a situation rather than abstracting from it (Vaill, 1989, p. 188). Actions taken in a *wu-wei* state appear effortless and instinctive. Indeed, individuals act when conditions are appropriate and without delay between thought and action; thought and action occur simultaneously. They calmly execute the purposes of their work with full presence in the existing context. This effortless and instinctive action is defined as *wu-wei*, characterized by a state of being un-self-conscious and at ease.

Practice is defined as “the conscious ability to produce fairly consistent intended results across a range of circumstances. To do this well, one must grow and change to meet the evolving situations in which one exists” (Vaill, 2020). Through the practice of *wu-wei* management, business professionals learn to “flow” with the system and make appropriate changes. This process involves examining their values regarding relationships with themselves, others, and the external environment. Through learning, they come to understand that their best choices in specific situations are temporal. They develop their learning methods and determine what to focus on to consistently deliver results in diverse circumstances and strive to live fully as human beings.

To practice *wu-wei*, we must develop the necessary skills. Our effortless actions arise from a wealth of embodied knowledge, a clear mind, and careful reflection on how to align our actions with our circumstances and self-understanding. The pursuit of *wu-wei* also transforms our being and nurtures our growth as we learn to unlearn and let go throughout this journey. Ultimately, *wu-wei* represents an ideal spiritual state, characterized by spontaneous mastery that aligns with both our situations and the Way of the universe, accompanied by love.

Professionals enhance their expertise by immersing themselves in perceived realities, developing *wu-wei* actions that align with their deep inner consciousness and understanding of context. When transferring their learning to new situations, they must reflect on their cherished values and adapt accordingly. They should recognize their growth and create meaning from the changes they undergo while delivering results across various circumstances. The *wu-wei* actions they take unify thought and action, with their thought being closely linked to individual moral consciousness. This alignment allows them to find deeper meaning in both the results they seek and the changes they make, both externally and internally. Ultimately, the unity of self and environment within *wu-wei* is supported by the development of spiritual and moral character. Those who practice *wu-wei* attract people through greater values; they appear relaxed and deeply absorbed in meaningful pursuits. Slingerland (2014) noted, “true *wu-wei* is a sign of genuine commitment to the activity and its larger framework” (p. 192).

The Relationships Between *wu-wei* and Christ-Centered AI Ethical Framework

The traditional Chinese wisdom of *wu-wei* encourages leaders to empty themselves and fully immerse themselves in each situation and discover inherent synergy. Achieving this requires unlearning and self-reflection. Leaders must confront their inner fears and habitual interactions with constituencies and materials and be willing to unlearn as situations evolve. By embracing their limitations, anxieties, and the ambiguities inherent in various contexts, they can engage with their followers patiently and humbly. Wise leaders must remain vigilant about the biases embedded in data and the ways information is represented. They determine which tasks are best entrusted to AI and which human capabilities must be cultivated to foster deeper wisdom and sounder judgment. They invest in developing uniquely human skills: empathy, contextual reasoning, critical digital literacy, moral reflection, and the ability to navigate ambiguity. They resist being confined by AI algorithmic designs and intuitively perceive challenges even when data are absent. A *wu-wei*-oriented perspective urges leaders to do the following tasks:

- Resist dehumanization in algorithmic decision making.
- Protect organizational ecosystems as sites of interconnected consciousness.
- Value indigenous wisdom, local perspectives, and tacit forms of knowing.
- Be responsible in the development and implementation of AI in their organizations by developing learning culture that encourages transparency, ethical principles, and accountability in the organizations.

Guided by the practice of *wu-wei*, they immerse themselves in the evolving landscape of AI. They demystify AI through questioning, collaboration, imagination, and the continual rhythm of unlearning and relearning. They embrace their “learned ignorance,” cultivating the capacity to imagine and judge beyond the boundaries of AI epistemology. They learn to navigate diverse epistemologies with flexibility (i.e., epistemological flexibility), openness to uncertainty (i.e., epistemological vulnerability), and humility in examining assumptions (i.e., epistemological humility). They discern which epistemology fits a given context and critically interrogate dominant narratives shaping AI-augmented decision making. Through patience, they fine tune their responsiveness and skills, intuitively grasping the essence of complex situations and crafting responsible responses aligned with the vision of Christ’s Kingdom, empowered by the Holy Spirit. They embody Christ as their center in all actions, seeking synergy with patience and accepting emerging realities beyond AI’s predictive reach. They serve with humility, pursuing justice and peace for many, instead of self-glorification. They nurture trust among various stakeholders through managing collective consciousness and multiple epistemologies with truth and grace. Ultimately, the practice of *wu-wei* integrates Christian consciousness into the fabric of

reality, enabling leaders to act with wisdom and experience the ideal spiritual and moral state of being with God's help.

***Wu-wei* Practices That Cultivate Wise Christ-Centered Leaders**

Individual leaders need to be humble and embrace their learned ignorance and develop capacities to imagine and judge large quantities of information beyond AI epistemology boundaries. Individually, they should know who they are (i.e., personhood), allow themselves to practice mindfulness in the present moment, and meditate (Eshelman et al., 2012). They ought to know how to empty out of the information provided by AI, fine tune their skills and responsiveness, and grow to deliver consistent results across various situations regardless of AI datasets. They should enjoy the process of practicing and seem to be effortless with nondeliberative spontaneity (i.e., *wu-wei* state). They respect our existence of being humans and expect to become fully human in Christ through the practice of *wu-wei*.

Leaders realize that precision and optimization of human preferences in the AI system are not our human ethics. They provide more time for themselves and their followers to think and connect with Holy Spirit. They would not like to overestimate the effect of technology in the short run or underestimate its effect in the long run. Whether they embrace or apprehend how AI is integrated into their workplace or their lives, they clearly understand our lives are not defined by computer-aggregated data. And because they also know AI is a social-technology system created by human beings with its own epistemological assumptions about what knowledge is, they practice *wu-wei* and empty out the knowledge created by AI with the practice of questioning, collaborating, imagining, and ongoing unlearning and relearning process. They know how to develop excellence through *wu-wei* as a management metaphor. They develop true wisdom from ambiguity and vagueness.

The practice of *wu-wei* in our leadership development will view human beings as "continuously becoming" (Vaill, 1989, p. 137) and enhance leaders' spiritual development (Mirvis, 2008). Leaders should be empowered to examine the operation of consciousness and experience stillness as part of their human development. Such an approach develops leaders' abilities to "live with these ambiguities, and periodically to reconceptualize them" in a world with ambiguity or a high rate of change (Schoemaker, 2008, p. 135). They will know the importance of increasing consciousness of the "inherent contradictions, dilemmas and predicaments of managerial situations" in a proper leadership development process (Chia, 2005, p. 1092). They will learn how to develop stronger empathy toward practitioners and evaluate their performance from their perspectives. In the process, they also learn how to allocate their attention resources properly and practice goodness without possessing them (Shotter & Tsoukas, 2014). They will be more conscious about their own growth and changes in

the process of delivering results in a wide range of circumstances in our new AI-driven world.

As management educators facilitate leaders to realize the moment of wonder and joy and practice *wu-wei* in many activities and reflection assignments, students can be fully human and fully embrace their different aspects of their lives. They can become fully functioning people in Christ as we can set aside time to be, to reflect, to access vital life energy in the stage of tranquil stillness, and to grow at a healthy and nurturing pace (Benefiel, 2005; Buscaglia, 1978; Eshelman et al., 2012; Vaill, 1989). They are likely to be thoughtfully engaged in what they do and how they do it. They also develop their capacity to practice *wu-wei*.

Students need to understand the importance of incorporating diverse epistemologies and coming up with effective actions to address the needs of various stakeholders in each situation. These actions are often temporary and represent the best responses in specific contexts. Students must envision the types of learners they will become as they transfer their knowledge from one context to another and adapt to the continuous changes in their professional lives. Students should also be guided to develop certain inquiry-based skills that involve a consciousness of the situation and the alignment of collective perceived realities. They will practice listening with charity and help themselves to observe how their assumptions, norms, and values operate in their inquiry. They can see how their consciousness of the situation will be part of the situation in which they have to act. They will learn how to act appropriately, effortlessly, and spontaneously (i.e., practice *wu-wei*). They should be guided to develop their habits of reflection and learn how to think about their growth and changes when they must deliver results in a wide range of circumstances. They should also be facilitated to seek meanings for their growth and changes in select low-stakes and rewarding reflection assignments.

I propose that it is important to invite and encourage professional management educators, university management students, and management professionals to fully experience *wu-wei* in their own lives and experience a freshness and joy in being present in each classroom or workplace. They are likely to be thoughtfully engaged in what they do and how they do it. They also develop their capacity to practice *wu-wei*. In summary, they learn how to purify their hearts, refine their experiences, empty their thoughts, and immerse themselves in the reality around them such that they can respond effortlessly. They grow and change themselves up to the highest spiritual state when they consciously produce fairly consistent intended results across a range of circumstances.

Conclusion

AI innovation continues to reshape decision making through unprecedented levels of automation and augmentation. Yet, it cannot replicate the depth, mystery, and relational nature of human consciousness. To navigate this evolving landscape, I propose that leaders embrace *wu-wei* – the Taoist principle of effortless action in the journey of becoming wiser Christian disciples. This practice nurtures epistemological flexibility, vulnerability, and humility, qualities that allow collective consciousness to emerge and enable participants to engage in relational becoming while deepening their spiritual growth for Christ’s Kingdom. Through *wu-wei*, Christian consciousness can remain connected to the changing AI ecosystem, fostering experiences of flow and redeemed work. To embark on this journey toward *wu-wei* wisdom, we must purify our hearts, refine our experiences, empty our thoughts, and immerse ourselves in the reality around us. Unlearning our previous successful skills or knowledge in the new context is ironically the path toward genuine wisdom and insight. When leaders immerse themselves in the realities of AI ecosystems, they uphold values such as care, empathy, human dignity, and relational integrity – virtues often overshadowed by AI technology.

As our current social, political, and economic systems are lagging behind rapid AI development, Christians can draw inspiration from *wu-wei* to cultivate critical digital literacy and imagine alternative ecosystems that prioritize human flourishing. In summary, integrating *wu-wei* into Christ-centered AI ethics cultivates epistemological flexibility, vulnerability, and humility. These qualities enable leaders to ethically navigate many disruptive changes, uphold Kingdom values, and envision alternative ecosystems that advance human flourishing, while fostering spiritual growth and critical digital literacy. Wise leaders will deepen their self-awareness and collective consciousness for Christ’s Kingdom, grounding wisdom in accumulated humility, meekness of demeanor, and openness of the minds to the Holy Spirit.

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