Spirituality, Virtue, and Management:

Theory and Evidence[[1]](#footnote-1)

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**Abstract**

This chapter presents an overview of the conceptual and empirical literature examining the interrelationships between spirituality, virtue, and management. Against the background of a Weberian conceptual framework, it will examine what the term spirituality refers to, how it is related to virtue, and what this means for management. As speculated by Weber, the literature suggests that there is a strong link between spirituality and virtue, and also that spirituality often gives rise to an alternative form of management that may enable escape from the materialist-individualist type. This “radical” form of management is typically associated with virtue ethics and counterposes the utilitarian assumptions of “conventional” management. Management guided by spirituality is often presented as pointing to a new paradigm in business.

**Keywords**

Max Weber, spirituality, virtue, materialism, individualism, self-interest, iron cage, radical management, interconnectedness, consequentialist utilitarianism, Management 2.0, process model

**Introduction**

Max Weber remains one of the most-cited and influential scholars in the organizational sciences (Dyck 2013; Miner 2003), and is still considered to be a leading moral philosopher of management (Clegg 1996). Though himself agnostic, Weber is also the most-cited classic scholar in the faith at work literature (e.g., Gundolf and Filser 2013). Thus it is appropriate that the discussion in this chapter follows a conceptual framework drawn from Weber (see Figure). In his most famous book, *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism,* Weber (1958, original 1904-05) describes at some length how a specific religious spirit, and its related virtues, give rise to and inform the organizational and management practices associated with capitalism. We will look at each of these three dimensions.

Spirituality Virtue

Management

**Figure: Weber’s explanatory model**

*Spirituality*

According to Weber, the spirit of modern capitalism was born out of a spirit of religious asceticism, which he associates with a specific Protestant ethic characterized by its dual emphasis on materialism and individualism related to its idea of “calling” (Dyck and Schroeder 2005; see also Novak 1996, Wiersma 2011). First, individuals are called to be *personally* responsible for their salvation, a marked contrast to the previously-dominant Catholic emphasis on salvation being achieved via the sacraments of the larger Church (e.g., by confession to a Priest). Second, this calling is linked to the *material* world, because the “*only* way of living acceptably to God was . . . through the fulfillment of the obligations imposed on the *individual* by his *position in the world* ” (Weber 1958, p. 80, emphasis added here). Foreshadowing the next two elements in the Figure, Weber goes on to argue that when “the spirit of Christian asceticism … was carried out of monastic cells into everyday life, and began to dominate worldly morality [virtues], it did its part in building the tremendous cosmos of the modern economic order [including management]” (Weber 1958, p. 180f.; bracketed expressions added).

*Virtues*

Weber identifies four (religious) virtues associated with the Protestant Ethic that are of particular importance for understanding the (secular) virtues associated with modern management (Dyck and Schroeder 2005). First, *brotherly love* → *specialization:* Weber argues that the Protestant Ethic virtue of brotherly love justified the idea of specialization because it recognized the division of labor and occupations as a direct consequence of the divine scheme of things where individuals fulfilled their daily tasks in the interests of their organizations (Weber 1958, pp. 108, 160). Second, *submission* → *centralization:* Weber argues that the Protestant Ethic virtue of submission supported the idea that it was part of the divine will for people to be divided into separate classes (e.g., employee versus employer) (Weber 158, pp. 160, 178). Third, *obedience* → *formalization:* Weber argues that the Protestant Ethic virtue of obedience emphasized passages in the Old Testament that praised formal legality as being a sign of conduct pleasing to God (Weber 1958, pp. 165, 123). And fourth, *non-worldliness* → *standardization:* Weber argues that the Protestant Ethic virtue of non-worldliness, which emphasized the repudiation of the flesh, served as an ideal foundation for people’s tendency toward uniformity in life that aids in the standardization of production (Weber 1958, p. 169).

*Management*

For Weber, the spirit associated with the Protestant Ethic, coupled with its accompanying virtues, gave rise to the peculiar understanding of management that is associated with capitalism, which is an “ideal type” of management that emphasizes productivity and efficiency and thus cannot help but result in material wealth. This material wealth in turn became a sign of effective salvation. Despite the resulting unprecedented economic growth, Weber nonetheless laments that this management approach has captured humankind in an “iron cage.” Moreover, he notes that the spirit of capitalism had already been secularized a century earlier, and that its proponents had subsequently rebuffed any religious or spiritual challenges to the dominant materialist-individualist type of management. He famously writes of the modern management paradigm: “Specialists without spirit, sensualists without heart; this nullity imagines that it has attained a level of civilization never before achieved” (Weber 1958, p. 182).

In sum, though Weber acknowledges that the three elements in the Figure influence each other (thus the two-headed arrows), his analysis actually describes the following implication: a particular spirit → associated virtues → corresponding management practices. Moreover, he concludes by asserting that spirituality represents the most likely way of developing new ways of managing that can successfully challenge shortcomings of the dominant materialist-individualist paradigm. In particular, Weber welcomes “new prophets” (e.g., spiritual messengers) and a “great rebirth of old ideas and ideals” (e.g., virtues), arguing that religious or spiritual ideas may be able to overcome the dominant status quo precisely because they “contain a law of development and a compelling force entirely their own” (Weber 1958, pp. 182, 278). The remainder of the chapter will examine the literature around each of the three elements in the Figure, emphasizing empirical findings associated with their interrelationships.

**Literature on spirituality**

The scholarly study of spirituality in the workplace has a relatively short history, but the past few years have seen the publication of several literature reviews of this growing field (e.g., Geigle 2012, Hackett and Wang 2012, Karakas 2010). In addition to Max Weber’s work, key books in the field include monographs by Denton and Mitroff (1999) and Hicks (2003), and edited volumes by Giacalone and Jurkiewicz (2003), Bouckaert and Zsolnai (2011), and Neal (2013). An on-going theme in the literature concerns a developing consensus about a definition of spirituality. For example, Giacalone and Jurkiewicz (2003, p. 7) provide a list of 14 definitions, and Karakas (2010) observes that there are at least 70 definitions of spirituality. There are two recurring issues in the discussions of how to define spirituality. The first issue, which will be dealt with in the next section, is that many definitions conflate, on the one hand, spirituality and, on the other, virtues or values. The second issue concerns whether one can be spiritual without being religious, though arguably this debate has more to do with how one defines religion. If religion is defined broadly and inclusively—for example, by referring to *how* people manifest their spiritual life, including what practices or virtues are associated with their spirituality—then there would be few who argue that spirituality has nothing to do with religion. However, if religion is defined very narrowly and exclusively—for example, genuine spirituality is only possible via a particular religion—then most people would agree that one can be spiritual without being religious. Closely related to this debate about religion and spirituality is whether spirituality demands a belief in some sort of God or Higher Power or Creator (e.g., Dent, Higgins and Wharff 2005). One study of over 100 books related to spirituality in the workplace found that fewer than twenty refer to some higher power like God (Marcic 2000, p. 629).

Fortunately there seems to be some emerging consensus that spirituality has three often inter-related dimensions: (1) an interconnectedness with a transcendent or sacred “Other” (for many this is related to some understanding of God, while for others it is linked to ideas associated to mindfulness); (2) an interconnectedness with others; and (3) an interconnectedness with the natural world. This threefold understanding of spirituality is evident in a wide variety of places, including the aboriginal cultures in Canada (Bell 2011), the *kaitiakitanga* management practices evident in the Māori economy in New Zealand (Spiller, Pio, Erakovic and Henare 2011), in the definition used by the European “Spirituality in Economics and Society” Forum, and in the recent edited volume by Bouckaert and Zsolnai (2011). The threefold definition is also consistent with the only developed spirituality scale that has been shown to demonstrate face-, content-, discriminant-, and convergent-validity, as well as structural reliability (Liu and Robertson 2011). The sixty-five different scales that have been used in 29 earlier empirical articles (Fornaciari et al. 2005) focus mainly on ethics, religion and faith, values and beliefs, and virtues, rather than on “spirituality” itself (Liu and Robertson 2011; see also Geigle 2012, who notes a lack of transcendence and interconnectedness in the previously popular scales). Liu and Robertson (2011, p. 37) describe a “spirituality continuum” that moves from *low* to *high* forms of spirituality as a person’s self-identity moves from “individual” (self as independent and separate from others; see also “self-interested spirituality” described in Moberg and Calkins 2001, p. 264) to “relational” (emphasizes personalized relationships with significant others), to “collective” (emphasizes identification with a social group, even without personal relationships), and lastly to “transcendental” (as “characterized by self-expansiveness that transcends the boundary demarcating the self from non-self, expands self-boundaries intrapersonally, interpersonally, and transpersonally, and demonstrates a sense of interconnection with human beings, nature, all living things, and a higher power”). Whereas most spirituality research focuses on interconnectedness with others (Karakas and Sarigollu 2013, Kasser 2011, Pavlovich and Krahnke 2012), some research focuses on interconnectedness with the sacred (Dyck and Weber 2005, Dyck, 2014), and some on interconnectedness with nature (Allevato and Marques 2011, Driscoll et al. 2012, Ims 2011, Stead and Stead 2013, Verbos et al. 2011).

**Spirituality and virtue**

There are two types of studies which are relevant here. First, as mentioned earlier in this chapter, many studies essentially define or operationalize spirituality in terms of values and virtues, treating them essentially as synonymous with spirituality. For example, Reave (2005) reviews 150 studies that examine leadership practices that have been emphasized in many spiritual teachings—including honesty, integrity, humility, respecting others, justice, compassion, listening, recognizing other’s contributions, and engaging in reflective practices—and shows how these are linked to leadership effectiveness, noting however for her purposes “Spiritual individuals are perhaps more likely to demonstrate spiritual leadership, but a person does not have to be spiritual or religious to provide spiritual leadership” (Reave 2005, p. 663). In their recent review of the literature, Hackett and Wang (2012) identify 23 virtues and traits that have been positively associated with spiritual leadership, including a caring nature, forgiveness, honesty, hope, humility, integrity, patience, perseverance, justice, self-control, wisdom, and courage. Taken together, these studies are premised on the idea that spirituality and virtues are deeply linked, but also that people with low spirituality can nevertheless exhibit virtues (which is consistent with Weber’s observation that people who exhibit the virtues associated with capitalism may be “without spirit;” cf. Hudson 2013, p. 12).

Second, of particular interest are the relatively few studies that treat spirituality and virtues as separate ideas, and go to some lengths to describe possible interrelationships. While some studies note that virtues may inform spirituality, most focus on spirituality leading to virtues (Frisdiantara and Sahertian 2012, Karakis 2010, Osman-Gani et al. 2010). Cavanagh and Bansuch (2002) suggest that spirituality is appropriate for the workplace when it gives rise to virtues, but not when it gives rise to discrimination. With regard to the character of the virtues related to spirituality, strikingly many studies are consistent with Weber’s (1958) suggestion that spirituality is particularly well-suited to ushering virtues that challenge the “iron cage” (Bouckaert and Zsolnai 2012, p. 490). Spirituality is especially important for challenging the twin hallmarks of materialism and individualism which for Weber are characteristic for management under capitalism (Calás and Smircich 2003, Kasser 2011, Pruzan, 2011, Zamagni 2011). Dyck and Weber’s (2006) empirical study found that the more emphasis that (religious) managers place on their spiritual connectedness with the sacred (via prayer and being mindful of God in the workplace), the less likely they are to be “conventional managers” (who place relatively high emphasis on materialism and individualism, and on the virtues of specialization, centralization, formalization and standardization), and the more likely they are to be “radical managers” (who place relatively low emphasis on materialism and individualism, and relatively high emphasis on values like sensitization, dignification, participation, and experimentation).

**Spirituality and management**

There are two basic themes in the literature that describe the effects of spirituality on management and organizational practices. First, numerous scholars have attempted to make the “business case” that spirituality is related to improved organizational profitability (Frisdiantara and Sahertian 2012, Poole 2009). In some sense this is counter-intuitive and goes against earlier research demonstrating that instrumental approaches to spirituality are self-defeating (Althauser 1990). In any case, there is little empirical support for the contention that spirituality—measured as interconnectedness with the sacred, with others, or with nature—helps to improve organizational profitability. To illustrate the thinness of this argument, consider that the empirical support Garcia-Zamor (2003) uses to defend his argument that spirituality improves profits is a Harvard Business School study that demonstrates that ten companies with strong corporate cultures (which he equates to “spirited workplaces”) outperformed ten firms with weak cultures. That said, empirical studies do suggest that spirituality is related to organizational outcomes other than profits. For example, Osman-Gani et al. (2013) found that spirituality has a positive relationship with “performance” (measured as ability to learn, dependability, industry and application, initiative, judgment and common sense, knowledge of work, quality of work, or quantity of work; Sarmiento et al. 2007). Similarly, Petchsawang and Duchon (2012) found that spirituality was associated with overall higher scores of organizational outcomes including employees’ competency, creativity, human relation skills, learning and development skills, and quality and quantity of work. And third, Green et al. (2012) show that leaders’ spirituality is related to their effectiveness measured in terms of their inspirational motivation, intellectual stimulation, and individual consideration. Moreover, this study shows that leaders’ virtues (prudence, fortitude, temperance, and justice) are also related to their effectiveness, but the data do not support the argument that spirituality implies virtues, which in turn imply effective leadership. In sum, rather than improved profits, empirical studies are more likely to link spirituality to outcomes like treating others with dignity and common sense. In this light, consider Senger (1970), perhaps the earliest study related to this topic in a top management journal, who found that the more religious or spiritual managers are, (1) the more likely they are to emphasize being a constructive force in their community versus maximizing their personal satisfaction (low individualism); (2) the less emphasis they place on making a lot of money and on maximizing long-term profits (low materialism); and (3) the higher the competency ratings they are given by their superiors.

This paradox, namely that spirituality is associated with low individualism and low materialism, yet with high approval from managers, points to the second theme in the literature regarding management outcomes associated with spirituality. It is striking how frequently these studies point to an alternative approach to management that enables escaping the iron cage associated with traditional management (e.g., Parameshwar 2005, Waddock and Steckler 2013). In particular, the spirituality literature has many studies that contrast and compare, for example conventional management versus radical management (Dyck and Schroeder 2005, Dyck and Weber 2006); Traditional Management Principles (TMP) versus Management-by-Virtues (Nur 2003); “old paradigm” versus “new paradigm” management (Ashar and Lane-Maher 2004); Mainstream versus Multistream Management (Dyck and Wong 2010); and even Management 1.0 versus Management 2.0 (Hamel 2009, who mentions theology as a source for scholars to draw upon to develop Management 2.0). Similarly, a recent review of management research drawing from the world’s five leading world religions found that *all* the empirical studies of managers who put into practice the spiritual teachings of their religion were manifesting radical management (Dyck, 2014). This lends support to Weber’s contention that spiritual practices based on the ideas and ideals of prophets result in escaping from the “iron cage.”

Perhaps the most developed process model in the literature that focuses on the three dimensions in the Figure presents a virtuous cycle that links them together (Dyck and Wong 2010; see also the virtue circle in Verbos et al. 2011). First, spirituality is linked with virtue insofar as spirituality is facilitated by practicing spiritual disciplines (which resemble virtues), and insofar as it enhances timeless virtues. In particular, Dyck and Wong describe how Foster’s (1978) four classic corporate spiritual disciplines can form a virtuous cycle as they unfold over time, and how these in turn are loosely associated with the four cardinal virtues. Dyck and Wong then go on to describe how the four spiritual disciplines give rise to an alternative (iron-cage liberating) way of conceiving Fayol’s (1930) four classic management functions.

**Conclusion**

Using the three-dimensional conceptual framework shown in the Figure to examine the literature related to spirituality, virtue, and management, lends strong support to the general thrust of Weber’s argument. Both the theoretical and empirical literatures point to a strong link between spirituality and virtue, and particularly the empirical research suggests that spirituality does indeed give rise to an alternative form of management that can enable escape from the materialist-individualist “iron cage” (which is again consistent with Weber’s speculation). Taken together, there are at least two important implications relevant for organizational research. First, there appears to be a qualitative difference between the virtues associated with conventional management (which is often based upon utilitarian consequentialist philosophy) and radical management (which is often based on virtue theory) (Dyck and Neubert 2010, chapter 5). Second, people who are spiritual—that is, who feel a deep interconnectedness with the sacred, with others, or with nature—are more likely to practice radical management.

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