



## ***The Spirit at Work Phenomenon***

by **Sue Howard & David Welbourn**

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This review was prepared in response to an invitation from the *Journal of Management, Spirituality and Religion* ([www.jmsr.com](http://www.jmsr.com)). However, due to an administrative oversight, it was never published.

Browsing in a local bookstore recently, I noticed that the Business Management section fitted neatly into one bay. Spirituality spread over three. *The Spirit at Work Phenomenon* would find a worthy place in either classification.

A distinctive feature of the book is that it is written from a European – strictly British – perspective. It is replete with geographical references – terrain, journey, footprint – and provides a well-ordered introductory travel guide. The authors make the bold assertion that 'this is the first [book] to draw together in a single volume all the central aspects of workplace spirituality' (p3). In general, they live up to their claim. Writing as involved observers, they introduce us to Gillian, whose comments from an HR perspective are the closest we get to hands-on management.

The book encourages us to make connections: to self, others, nature and a higher power. These connections are explored first from an individual perspective, then from a corporate view. The central theme, 'that personal transformation is the gateway to leading organizational transformation' (p166), reflects Western individualism.

Howard and Welbourn begin with the emergence of spirituality in the workplace: they range over technological advances through corporate social responsibility (CSR) and business ethics, via 9/11 to eco-feminism and globalization. Workplace sensibilities follow: working life as an affront to the human spirit and the search for meaning. A chapter on the so-called new paradigm gives a prominence to mysticism not found in all 'new science' writers.

***The Spirit at Work  
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The first of two central sections begins with the question, What is Spirituality? In reply, the authors quote several writers from different traditions. They touch on the relevance – or otherwise – of organised religion, reaching the thoroughly postmodern conclusion that 'our outlook is made up of a mishmash of ideas' and unpicking our inheritance 'is a personal task which no one else can complete for us' (p42). Here again is the individualistic approach.

Connecting with the self involves understanding different psychological approaches, as well as intelligences (IQ, EQ and SQ). Describing Wilber's 'levels' of spiritual growth, the authors add a note of caution as to whether human development is so stage-like (how ironic that writers refer to stages of growth or enlightenment, yet emphasise a paradigm that encourages us to move from Newtonian models to a universe of chaos and complexity!).

The quest of seeking connection with others is helped by Buber's philosophy and Bohm's scientific explorations. Dialogue is a key process for encouraging engagement and moving from individual to group – even societal – transformation.

It comes as no surprise to find Lovelock's *Gaia* at the centre of connections with nature, though Fox and Rupert Sheldrake are also well to the fore. Spiritual perspectives come from Hindu and Native American traditions. A quote from the 6<sup>th</sup> century BCE *Tao Te Ching* about humanity's impact on nature could preface any contemporary account on Kyoto.

The authors recognise the challenge of referring to a higher power, which might be conceived as inner discovery through group consciousness to transcendent deity. Fox and Bohm are again among our guides. A thoughtful section on evil is based on an idea from Zohar and Marshall. The authors consider the place of religions. Acknowledging the current debate, their survey of Eastern, Western and indigenous native religions concludes that they can contribute, but that religion as experienced is rarely religion as it could be. They plead for religions to renew themselves to reveal their true treasures.

So to the corporate journey. We start with authentic leadership: 'In one sense this whole book is devoted to leadership issues' (p115). Our guides range from Drucker through Bennis to the excellent Wheatley. At last, we move beyond the individual through Senge's learning organisations and community wisdom. Then on to a planetary perspective. Reflecting on CSR, the purpose of business and the place of stakeholders leads to the 'triple bottom line': financial, social, environmental. Paralleling their consideration at a personal level, the authors raise the notion of structural evil.

Now comes the crunch. How can spirituality unlock corporate transformation? Referring to Mitroff and Denton's five models of organizational spirituality, the authors ask, Is spirit profitable? They dispassionately state that there is, as yet, insufficient research evidence to provide an answer.

In closing, Howard and Welbourn survey companies that can be described as spirit-led, then look ahead before providing a useful compendium of resources. Their view is summarised as hopeful and realistic, with an emphasis on the here and now.

*The Spirit at Work Phenomenon* provides a fine introduction, valuable to practitioners and students alike. Those involved in the world of business might have wished to see more real-world examples (the first mention of an actual company I spotted was on p149). Academics will welcome the detailed references, but might have appreciated an index.

An introductory text challenge others to explore further. Topics which the book prompted include:

- The role of religions. In a critique of spirituality in the workplace, Hicks (2003) promotes a 'respectful pluralism'.
- Business results of organisations espousing a spiritual approach. Research should include engagement with general managers, not just HR professionals.
- The risks associated with spirituality at work. Tourish (2005) has highlighted the dangers of coercive persuasion.
- Links between spirituality, corporate ethics and CSR. Cavanagh (1999) notes the opportunities for cross-fertilization.
- A radical change of perspective, starting not with the individual, but the community and/or relationships.

In the meantime, browsers of both business management and spirituality sections would benefit from reading *The Spirit at Work Phenomenon*.

## REFERENCES

- Cavanagh, Gerald F. (1999) 'Spirituality for Managers: Context and Critique', *Journal of Organizational Change Management* **12**, pp186–199.
- Hicks, Douglas A. (2003) *Religion and the Workplace: Pluralism, Spirituality, Leadership*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Tourish, Dennis. (2005) 'Transformational Leadership and the Perils of Coercive Persuasion', Paper presented at the 4<sup>th</sup> International Conference on Studying Leadership, Lancaster UK.