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# Spiritually inspired creativity in business

Spiritually  
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business

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## Abstract

**Purpose** – The purpose of this paper is to investigate the relation of spirituality and creativity in business context.

**Design/methodology/approach** – The paper presents practical examples of spiritual-based creative business models in different faith traditions (Hinduism, Christianity and Anthroposophy).

**Findings** – Spirituality and a deep sense of connectedness are essential to enhance creativity and care in business. Spirituality creates free space and openness to allow the future to emerge organically. It creates a distance between the self and the pressures of the market and the routines of business and daily life. This distance is a necessary condition for developing creative, ethical and responsible solutions to the complex challenges around us.

**Originality/value** – Spiritually inspired creative business models overcome the instrumental rationality and materialistic orientation of today's business management which produces large scale ecological, social and ethical "ills." The paper shows that alternative business management practices need a spiritual foundation to be more creative and caring.

**Keywords** Religion, Sustainability, Social economy, Entrepreneurship, Management, Human development

**Paper type** Research paper

## 1. Introduction: creativity and spirituality

Luc de Brabandere makes a distinction between innovation and creativity. Innovation is to change reality. It requires action by a team, is continuous, takes a long time, and delivers something new to the system. Its impact is measurable and certain, and requires the tools of project management. Creativity, on the other hand, changes perception and requires new thinking and feeling. It is discontinuous, and takes an instant. Its impact cannot be measured, and it requires learning methods fueled by questions, surprises and incomplete answers (de Brabandere, 2005).

Changing our perception is not easy particularly when we are surrounded with taken for granted, unchallenged assumptions about our business and social environments. Phenomenology provides us new ways of perceiving reality. "Phenomenology [...] examines the limitations of truth: the inescapable 'other sides' that keep things from ever being fully disclosed, the errors and vagueness that accompany evidence, and the sedimentation that makes it necessary for us always to remember again the things we already know" (Sokolowski, 2000, p. 21). It reclaims the validity of epistemologies more associated with philosophy than science, especially in developing truths about the everyday world of human beings.

Phenomenology recognizes the subjective nature of knowledge and pays close attention to lived experience as a valid source of knowing. It embraces the significance of meaning within the human sense-making processes. Concerned with aspects of quality rather than quantity, it reasserts the importance of felt experience as well as the cumulative effects of history on our ability to know.

The father of phenomenology, Edmund Husserl (1859-1938) argued that the tools of modern science are not equipped to address questions of meaning and significance central to human lives (Husserl, 1970). In order to better understand a phenomenon such as



leadership, for example, we must attend to it in the particular circumstances in which it arises rather than through abstract theoretical frameworks. These circumstances Husserl (1967) called “The Lifeworld”. Phenomenologists argue that the way any perceived phenomenon is known is entirely interwoven with the viewpoint of the perceiver. “The Lifeworld” is a “universal framework for all of human endeavor” and as such encompasses scientific as well as philosophical endeavors.

Social construction is a unique human process. Freedom, for example, does not exist in a material form, it does not have substance or shape (Ladkin, 2010, p. 20). The power of concepts arises from the way in which they remain unquestioned and remain generally accepted. In order to change our perception we need to ask new questions and appreciate the interconnectedness of the different sides and aspects of the phenomenon we are studying.

In this paper, we shall not discuss the specific language of phenomenology or explain how research is done from a phenomenological perspective. However, we would like to emphasize that from a phenomenological perspective, an entity’s identity always remains elusive and a thing’s identity will always be beyond the reach of human appreciation. Certain phenomena such as leadership, management, creativity, business and spirituality do not exist on their own. Their “beingness” is dependent on the things of which they are part of. Consequently they cannot be removed from their environment and studied appropriately in the abstract. A phenomenological perspective acknowledges the subjective nature and limitations of research in social science.

Changing one’s perspective is an individual process. It requires a level of curiosity, open mindedness, continuous questioning and regular reflection. In confronting oneself, taking responsibility for one’s own thoughts, feelings, emotions and actions, one touches upon a level of awareness where one experiences unity with all the living through love and compassion and the power of creativity (Andras, 2015). Spirituality appears as a precondition of this process and the source of creativity. It transcends ego-centeredness and creates experiences of interconnectedness and wholeness. Spiritual practices teach us to slow down, quite the busyness of the mind, suspend judgment, let go of the past, be with the empty space within, accept the uncertainty of not knowing and patiently wait for something new to emerge. Scharmer (2009) calls this process “presencing” and argues that with an open mind, open heart and open will we are able to learn to lead from the future as it emerges.

Creating free space and allowing the future to emerge is a necessary condition for bringing forth creative, ethically sound ideas and practices. It restores intrinsic motivation and provides a long-term horizon. Although there is a lot of evidence to support the value of contemplative practices throughout history spirituality has not gained full recognition in the academic and business world of the twenty-first century yet. In academia and business, instrumental and utilitarian rationality is still the dominant perspective, whereas spirituality is anchored in a deeper, non-instrumental and non-utilitarian experience of life. Current forms of education provide plenty of opportunities for learning how to satisfy the hunger for money and material success; however, one needs to search actively and select critically the appropriate guidance when it comes to searching for meaning and purpose in life (Illes, 2014). The growing interest in mindfulness meditation (Kabat-Zinn, 2011), embodiment of leadership (Melina *et al.*, 2013) and the demand for ethical, sustainable and spiritually inspired business (Bouckaert and Zsolnai, 2012a) indicates a shift in attitudes of seekers who want to live and work differently.

Spirituality can be contrasted with religion. While spirituality relates to the soul or spirit, religion refers to the existence of a superhuman controlling power, especially of God or Gods, usually expressed in worship. Religion is an organized approach to the supernatural reality by human activities, which usually encompass a set of narratives, beliefs and practices. Spirituality, on the other hand, is a multiform search for a transcendent meaning

of life based on the reflection of our human experience. On this level we are conscious of our connection with all beings and with the whole of creation (Bouckaert and Zsolnai, 2012a).

Paul de Blot warns that the difference between religion and spirituality can be a cause of conflict. If institutionalized religious belief creates a gap between itself and spiritual awareness, the spiritual experience of being will no longer be represented by religious doing and thinking. We can avoid this disconnection by keeping religion in touch with spiritual experience. In this case, religion can function as a source of inspiration for the spiritual growth of people (de Blot, 2012).

Hicks (2003) makes a distinction between religion and spirituality and using American examples suggest that “most accounts of spiritual leadership disguise genuine differences of perspective and potential conflict behind happy (and often false) commonality.” He proposes “respectful pluralism” as a framework to address conflicts that arise in organizations (Hicks, 2003, p. 2).

Sharda Nandram argues that “business devoid of spirituality breeds greed and exploitation” and that spirituality enhances awareness, belongingness and commitment (Nandram, 2010, p. ix).

## 2. Spirituality in business

For over a decade efforts have been made to include spirituality in business and economics all over the world. In 2001 one of the authors organized an international conference in Szeged, Hungary, which was probably the first European workshop on “Spirituality in Management.” The papers of this workshop were published in the Kluwer Academic Series of Business Ethics. After this workshop the cooperation among different European centers involved in business ethics resulted in setting up the European SPES Forum in 2004 in Leuven, Belgium (SPES, the Latin word for Hope, is also an acronym for “Spirituality in Economics and Society”). The aim of the Forum is to promote spirituality as a public good and as a source of non-instrumental reasoning in business. The European SPES Forum was just one among other new networks in the field of applied spirituality. In the USA and Asia similar initiatives took place. Wuthnow (2000) talks about a “quiet revolution” and reports that 40 percent of Americans are involved in a small group that meets regularly and provides support for its participants. Business spirituality is a global discourse embedded in a broader intercultural and intercontinental development. *The Palgrave Handbook of Business and Spirituality* (Bouckaert and Zsolnai, 2012b) is a response to developments that simultaneously challenge the “business as usual” mindset.

There is no universally accepted definition of spirituality. The word has different meanings for different people and in different cultures (McSherry and Cash, 2004). It is generally considered to be a complex, intercultural, multi-dimensional concept (Cook, 2004; Hill *et al.*, 2000; George *et al.*, 2000; Moberg, 2002; Bouckaert and Zsolnai, 2012a). Muldoon and King (1995, p. 336) suggest that spirituality is “the way in which people understand and live their lives in view of their ultimate meaning and value.” Vaughan (1991, p. 105) suggests that spirituality is “a subjective experience of the sacred.” Clark (1958) defines spirituality as the inner experience of the individual as evidenced by attempts to harmonize day to day life with the beyond. Meezenbroek *et al.* (2012) define “spirituality as one’s striving for and experience of connection with oneself, connectedness with others and nature and connectedness with the transcendent” (p. 338). In their book “Leading with Wisdom” Pruzan and Pruzan Mikkelsen (2007) provide an interesting collection of perspectives and definitions on spirituality, not by academics but by business leaders from around the world.

Connectedness plays a role in every human life. Connectedness with the transcendent includes connectedness with something or someone beyond the human level, such as God, the universe, transcendent reality, a higher power or consciousness. The term one uses is determined by one’s cultural heritage, life experience and environment. This level of

connectedness includes feelings of oneness, awe, hope, joy, sacredness and adoration of the transcendent (Cook, 2004; Meezenbroek *et al.*, 2012) and this inform and influence one's relationship with others and the environment.

Connectedness with oneself is expressed through actions based on moral values, authenticity, inner harmony, self-knowledge and search for meaning (Elkins *et al.*, 1988; Young-Eisendrath and Miller, 2000; Hungelmann *et al.*, 1985; Howden, 1992; Mahoney and Graci, 1999; Illes, 2012). Self-knowledge and connectedness with one's true self is the foundation for building meaningful relationships with others. The quest to "Know Thyself" has been an integral part of human development throughout history and each individual needs to make personal choices and discoveries on that journey. Connectedness to others and to nature can be expressed through compassion, caring, gratitude, selfless love and wonder.

We do not think that spirituality can be captured in one standard definition. Moreover, if we want to keep the notion of spirituality experience-based, we have to accept that spirituality is a rich, intercultural and multilayered concept. As a guideline we used the working definition of the SPES Forum: spirituality is people's multiform search for a deep meaning of life interconnecting them to all living beings and to "God" or "Ultimate Reality" (European SPES, 2015). This definition also includes Christian spirituality (Delbecq, 1999). Most definitions of spirituality share a number of common elements: reconnection to the inner self; a search for universal values that lifts the individual above egocentric strivings; deep empathy with all living beings; and finally, a desire to keep in touch with the source of life. In other words, spirituality is a search for inner identity, connectedness and transcendence.

The dominant model of modern mainstream business is based on a materialistic conception of man. Human beings are considered as body-mind encapsulated egos with only materialistic desires and motivation. This kind of creature is modeled as "Homo Oeconomicus" in economics and business. Homo Oeconomicus is an individual who seeks to maximize his or her self-interest. He or she is interested only in material utility defined in terms of money. The materialistic management model assumes money-driven extrinsic motivation and measures success according to profits generated. The current economic and financial crisis has deepened our understanding of the problems of mainstream businesses based on unlimited greed and the "enrich yourself" mentality (Zsolnai, 2015).

American psychologist Tim Kasser states that individuals with materialistic value orientation give priority to goals such as money, possessions, image and status. Confirming the concerns of many spiritual traditions, empirical research supports the idea that materialistic and spiritual value orientations are relatively incompatible. Psychological research shows that the more people focus on materialistic goals, the less they tend to care about spiritual goals. Further, while most spiritual traditions aim to reduce personal suffering and to encourage compassionate behaviors, numerous studies document that the more people prioritize materialistic goals, the lower their personal well-being and the more likely they are to engage in manipulative, competitive and ecologically-degrading behaviors (Kasser, 2011).

Copenhagen Business School scholar Peter Pruzan argues that spiritual-based leadership is emerging as an inclusive, holistic and yet highly personal approach to leadership that integrates a leader's inner perspectives about identity, purpose, responsibility and success with his or her decisions and actions in the outer world of business. The emergence of spiritual-based leadership can also be seen as an overarching perspective which may incorporate other approaches to leadership that are characterized by a focus on concepts such as "business ethics," "values-based leadership," "corporate social responsibility" and "sustainability." However, spiritually based leadership considers ethics, social responsibility and sustainability not as instruments to protect and promote the classical business rationale, but as fundamental goals in their own right (Pruzan, 2011).

Pruzan further argues that while traditional managerial leadership aims to optimize economic performance subject to both self-imposed and societal constraints that mandate paying attention to the well-being of the organization's stakeholders, spiritual-based leadership essentially reverses the means and the ends. The "why" of organizational existence is no longer economic growth but the spiritual fulfillment of all those affected by the organization, although a major restriction is the requirement that the organization maintains and develops its economic capacity to serve its stakeholders. In other words, spirituality provides a framework for leadership that can serve as the very source of an organization's values, ethics and responsibility (Pruzan, 2011).

Rhodes (2006) offers six effects associated with workplace spirituality. People with spirituality tend to focus on sustainability and long-term growth. They intend to make a contribution beyond personal interest, spiritual workplaces help people to uncover their creative potentials and encourage inclusivity. Such organizations promote long-term character development and do not simply offer training opportunities but actively support individuals to find their sense of "calling" or passion about their lives and work.

The spiritual-based management model employs a spiritual conception of man. Human beings are considered spiritual beings embodied in the physical world who have both materialistic and non-materialistic desires and motivations. For them, materialistic desires and outcomes are embedded in and evaluated against spiritual convictions and experiences.

Luk Bouckaert writes that the Homo Spiritualis is not characterized by preferences for and striving after maximum utility but by the awareness of being related to others. This inter-existence of the self and the other cannot be reduced to a shared group interest or a collective welfare function. We are interconnected on a level of being, prior to our acting within and making the world. The spirit in each of us is the point of awareness where we feel related to all other beings and to the being itself. This spiritual self-understanding is not a matter of abstract philosophical thinking but a feeling of universal love and compassion that gives our lives and actions an inner purpose and drive. It transforms our materialistic ego into a responsible and compassionate self (Bouckaert, 2011a).

Bouckaert formulated the following priority statements expressing the primacy of the spiritual in business (Bouckaert, 2011b):

- (1) The priority of basic needs over subjective preferences: preferences are individual and social constructions which express, intensify and transform basic needs, and in certain cases suppress and obstruct them. Basic needs, on the other hand, are the necessary preconditions for a humane existence in a historically and culturally determined community. One can translate basic needs into rights that one can claim on the basis of one's human dignity.
- (2) The priority of commitment over self-interest: experimental economics and economic psychology gives empirical support to the claim that social commitment has a moral priority over selfish behavior. Genuine commitment has its own logic. One who selflessly devotes one's life to promoting justice is aiming at something other than the pleasure of satisfying his/her own altruistic preferences. He or she does it for the sake of justice itself, not (at least not primarily) as a means to an extrinsic end, such as personal happiness or prestige. There is an essential difference between the instrumental function of a preference and the non-instrumental function of a commitment. While commitment is directed to bringing about an identity, a way of being, preference satisfaction aims at bringing about an advantage or a pleasure.
- (3) The priority of mutual trust over mutual advantage in the market: a well-functioning market requires cooperation and mutual trust. The market instrumentalizes all values in the function of individual, subjective preferences. When everyone determines their own values, a lack of moral cohesion can open the way to far-reaching opportunistic

behavior, which is in the long term a threat to the functioning of the market. Hence, there is the growing awareness that moral self-regulation and “social capital” in the form of mutual trust are constitutive of a well-functioning market.

- (4) The priority of economic democracy over shareholder capitalism: economic democracy is an alternative to bourgeois capitalism and to Marxist collectivism. Stakeholder management and co-creative entrepreneurship are highly valued in today’s capitalism. Business ethics criticizes shareholder capitalism and promotes the stakeholder theory of the firm. The strong version of stakeholder theory empowers stakeholders and makes them full partners of the firm. They receive the rights and claims of partners and form a community of co-responsible individuals. In principle, an economic democracy is broader than a workers’ democracy, while it aims at fostering the balanced participation of all stakeholders.

### 3. Working models of spiritually inspired businesses

We present three cases of spiritually inspired business models. The first is connected with Hindu spirituality, the second is based on Christian spirituality, while the third is influenced by Anthroposophy.

#### 3.1 *Organic India*

Bharat Mitra and a small group of people started an enterprise in the 1990s with the intention of providing Ayurvedic herbal formulations for the health and well-being of people coming to Lucknow, India. The company was renamed in 2006 to Organic India and continues to stand for the values it has been built on: service to all, total integrity, absolute commitment to quality, respect and devotion to Mother Nature, no compromise on being who we are. Organic India cultivates, collects, processes, manufactures and markets certified organic Tulsi teas, herbal supplements, Psyllium, castor oil, Ayurvedic and medicinal herbs, and many other organic foods and organic spices. It has melded 5,000 years of health wisdom and cutting edge technology to create premium products that conform to the highest manufacturing standards and ensure maximum retention of potency and nutritional values. It is committed to promote holistic sustainable development for all beings through organic agriculture, to service, sanctity and integrity, to operate an ethical, sustainable and socially, environmentally, economically responsible business that harms none and benefits all. Over the years it has evolved into a global leader in promoting organic products and in supporting sustainable farming, wild crafting and village/tribal and agricultural communities in India (Organic India, 2014).

#### 3.2 *The Economy of Communion (EoC)*

The EoC, was founded by Chiara Lubich in San Paolo Brazil in May 1991. It brings together entrepreneurs, workers, directors, consumers, savers, citizens, scholars and economists. These individuals are all committed, at various levels to promote a practice and an economic culture based on communion, gratuity and reciprocity. Entrepreneurs are invited to share their profit to sustain the goals of the EoC. These include: reduction of exclusion and its subsequent poverty; diffusion of the culture of giving and of communion: development of businesses and creation of new jobs. Members of the EoC are business people who can conceive and live their activity as a vocation, serve the common good and help the excluded in every part of the world and in every social context (Economy of Communion, 2014).

They follow a practical proposal and share the profits in the following three ways: one part of the profits is reinvested in the business in order to develop and create new jobs; the second part is used to create a new culture to inspire women and men capable of

incorporating communion into their lives; and the third part goes directly to the poor to reinsert them fully into the dynamic of communion and reciprocity (Bruni and Hejj, 2011).

The EoC is not an experience defined by philanthropists or great entrepreneurs who make donations to the poor without questioning their own lives, without becoming brothers or sisters in equal standing with the “poor” they are helping. The EoC businesses are really an EoC. Even when they have no profits to give they work to produce a culture of fraternity. Today the economy and society have a vital need for communion, happiness, relational goods and goods of gratuity. By remaining faithful to its vocation day by day, the EoC is increasingly capable of producing these typical “goods.” Unity with God and thinking in terms of community, this is the essence of the EoC (Bruni and Hejj, 2011).

### 3.3 *Triodos Bank*

Triodos Bank is a pioneer in sustainable and ethical banking with branches in the Netherlands, Belgium, the UK, Spain and Germany. Inspired by Rudolf Steiner’s anthroposophy, Triodos Bank’ mission is to make money work for positive social, environmental and cultural change. The bank is there to help to create a society that protects and promotes the quality of life of all its members; to enable individuals, organizations and businesses to use their money in ways that benefit people and the environment; to promote sustainable development, and to provide the customers with innovative financial products and high-quality service (Triodos, 2013).

Triodos only lends to and invests in organizations that benefit people and the environment. It connects savers and investors who want to change the world for the better with likeminded entrepreneurs and sustainable companies. Triodos is the only specialist bank to offer integrated lending and investment opportunities for the sustainable sectors in a number of European countries (Eco Question, 2013).

In consonance with its name of Triodos or “three way,” Triodos Bank has built its business model on the three pillars of people, planet and profits. The belief of the bank is simple and its mission is lucid – it finances companies, institutions and projects that add cultural value and benefit people and the environment with the support of depositors and investors who wish to encourage social responsibility and a sustainable society (Worldinquiry, 2013).

The money of socially and environmentally conscious depositors and investors is channeled toward businesses that are committed to positive change in the world through personal banking, business and charity banking, and investment banking options provided by the bank. The personal banking option ensures that the saver receives a healthy return on the deposit while being a part of the community that wants to make a genuine change. Through its business and charity banking offering the bank partners with organizations that share its values. The investment banking service helps raise capital, manage venture capital funds, and brings together like-minded investors by providing information on conscious investment opportunities. The bank has established a benchmark for financial transparency and in the process has raised the financial literacy of its customers.

In addition to the creative investment opportunities, Triodos finances practical and well-grounded initiatives that are dedicated to positive change. The bank lends to organizations like charities, social businesses, community projects and environmental initiatives that benefit the community, environment and human development. They invest in organic farming, organic food and environmental technology projects. They also provide financial services for selected trading, manufacturing and service providers including catering and business enterprise centers. Culture and welfare is encouraged through lending to borrowers who work to meet individual and community needs such as providing healthcare and education as well as those working in arts and social projects. The bank also



gives money to innovative social housing projects that respond to acute shortage of adequate housing in the UK. Religious and spiritual groups that respect human freedom also feature in the bank's list of borrowers (Worldinquiry, 2013).

Table I summarizes the main characteristics of the discussed business models.

What is common in the cases is that these businesses transcend the logic of the market and introduce creative solutions to pressing economic problems to produce goods that are truly good and provide services that really serve. Their creativity streams from their spiritual convictions on which their functioning is based. By their commitment to higher purposes and missions they are able to produce monetary results which ensure their flourishing.

**4. Conclusion: beyond the materialism of modern mainstream business**

There is growing evidence that the materialistic model of modern mainstream business does not produce true well-being for people and actually undermines well-being. "Outmoded mental models have produced an intellectual bankruptcy: the bankruptcy of mainstream economic thought" (Scharmer and Kaufer, 2013, p. 11). By advocating economic action on the basis of money-making, and by justifying success in terms of profits alone, the materialistic business model encourages the irresponsible behavior of economic actors, contributes to ecological destruction and disregards the interests of future generations. The presupposed and still widely used "rational management model" often produces non-rational outcomes for society, nature and future generations (Zsolnai, 2015).

Acknowledging the primacy of the spiritual, creative and caring business models may activate the intrinsic motivation of economic actors to serve the common good and employ multidimensional ways of measuring success. In these models the performance of business is not defined by profit and growth but by a broader set of values. Similarly, cost-benefit calculations are not the only means by which to make business decisions but are integrated into a more comprehensive scheme of wisdom-based management (Bouckaert and Zsolnai, 2012b).

Jonathan Rawson published an in-depth study with the title "Spiritualise: revitalising spirituality to address 21st century challenges." The report suggests that we need to give place to spirituality in the mainstream of our discussions in society. Currently "Our collective understanding of spirituality is oblique, nebulous and fissiparous when we need it to be fundamental, robust and centripetal" (Rowan, 2014, p. 7). Spirituality struggles to differentiate itself from religion on the one hand, and well-being on the other. To become a viable part of public discourse, we need to map out distinctive terrain that goes beyond emotions but does not collapse into ethics or aesthetics.

	Inspiration	Vision	Means	Outcomes
Organic India	Hindu spirituality	Holistic sustainable business which supports human well-being and respect all beings and Mother Nature	Providing genuine organic products and solutions for conscious, healthy living	Sustainable livelihood for farmers in India
Economy of Communion	Christian love, spirituality of unity	Serving the poor and the needy	Building relationships based on a culture of giving, solidarity and sharing	Restoring the dignity of persons and communities
Triodos Bank	Anthroposophy	Banking for positive social, environmental and cultural change	Screening the investments according to economic, social and environmental criteria	Financing sustainability and community development projects

**Table I.**  
Main characteristics of spiritually inspired creative businesses

Spirituality appears to be a precondition of creativity in good and caring management. We need to review our beliefs and change our perspectives, move away from the solely utilitarian, materialistic views of the world and take active roles in creating cultures of sharing and collaboration around us, shifting the focus from receiving to giving. This shift of perspective and behavior can play a key role in finding collaborative solutions to complex global challenges, while maintaining personal responsibility for our actions (Pope Francis, 2015). This process requires new forms and platforms for openly discussing our values, fears and vulnerabilities. We need to understand and connect with others for the co-creation of a meaningful future of business and beyond.

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