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## Spirituality: A Way to an Alternative Subjectivity?

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This paper emphasizes the contribution of Michel Foucault and Pierre Hadot to discussions of workplace spirituality. It is argued that their understanding of spirituality differs significantly from the mainstream management contributions: they view spirituality as a distinct form of post-modern subjectivity in organizations and regard the subject as continuous flow emerging and being constructed not so much at the crossroad of institutions and macro-structures but from within, with the help of self-formation practices. We term the latter spirituality and argue, firstly, that there are strong (albeit controversial) connections between spiritual practices, the history of Christianity, and the philosophy of antiquity. Secondly, we suggest that spirituality as a relationship of the self to the self can only take place once the individual removes him/herself from the demands of the future or the shackles of the past and focuses entirely on the present with the help of technologies of the self.

**Keywords:** Spirituality, Subjectivity, Foucault, Self-formation

The last decade has witnessed an increase in the literature dealing with the role of spirituality in management and leadership. Especially in the United States, the number of texts available on the topic is astonishing; a list compiled by Judi Neal (Neal, 2002) includes no less than 600 references to recent published works on spirituality in organizations. Additional sources can be found on the Internet; for example an Altavista search on 'spirituality' and 'management' led to over 1,000,000 hits (21.12.2004) on the topic. Apart from publications, a burgeoning number of practitioner conferences and management education packages on this topic can be seen as another manifestation of the growing interest on spirituality (Mirvis, 2000). More recently, the spirituality movement has also begun to influence academic debates about the changing nature of organizations and work. Special issues of *Organization*, *Journal of Management Inquiry* and *Journal of Organizational Change Management* (Calas and Smircich, 2003; Vaill, 2000; Butts, 1999), to name only a few, have been devoted to spirituality at work and several other management studies forums are also currently paying attention to the topic.

Ideas and approaches to spirituality differ, but seem to have two key themes in common, namely a fascination with the irrational, the emotional, the mysterious and the tacit; and a focus on transcendence, in the form of a connection with a higher level reality or cosmos (Tisdell, 2000; Slife, Hope and Nebeker 1999; Eisenberg 2001). In this paper, we debate the contribution of Pierre Hadot and Michel Foucault to our understanding of spirituality. Their approach to spirituality places an emphasis on embodiment and the importance of the relation of oneself with others in the quest for meaning and identity. We also tease out the implications of such ideas for organizational work practices. The French historian Pierre Hadot (1995, p. 82) explains 'spirituality' in the following fashion: 'It is ... necessary to use [exactly] this term, I believe, because none of the

other adjectives we could use—“psychic”, “moral”, “ethical”, “intellectual”, “of thought”, “of the soul”—covers all the aspects of the reality we want to describe. ... The word “spiritual” is quite apt to make us understand that these exercises are the result, not merely of thought, but of the individual’s entire psychism. Above all, the word “spiritual” reveals the true dimensions of these exercises. By means of them, the individual raises himself up to the life of the objective Spirit; that is to say, he re-places himself within the perspectives of the Whole (“Become eternal by transcending yourself”). Hadot’s view is strongly supported by Foucault (1985, 1986) whose work also implies that spirituality at work could potentially lead to the development of an ethical attitude. As such, through spiritual awareness, individuals can sense and control their passions and see their actions in a larger context. However, before we can fully appreciate the implications of this view on workplace spirituality, we need to take a look at the more mainstream approaches and the criticisms they have received in management and organization studies.

### **Spirituality in Organizations: Different Reactions**

Following Legge’s (1995) work in HRM, we can distinguish between normative, descriptive, and critical approaches on spirituality.

Normative work on spirituality can be classified in two categories: secular and religious. In the secular school of thought, the aim is to articulate the ideal type of spiritual organization, understood mainly as a workplace where strong values and ethical codes ensure that the personal pursuit of spirituality is channeled towards corporate objectives (e.g., Krieger and Hanson, 1999; Milliman, Ferguson, Trickett, and Condemi, 1999). Within this type of research, it is argued that to enable spirituality, organizations need to articulate universal values against which individuals can base their personal projects of transcendence and fulfilment. In the religious school of thought the idea is to use religious community as a model in which spirituality would lead to moral conduct and general well-being of organization. Although this is a smaller stream, some academic contributions explicitly acknowledge the Christian heritage in secular workplace spirituality and debate its potential for the development of spiritual management (Dehler and Welsh, 1994; Delbecq, 1999, 2000; King and Nicol, 1999).

Descriptive studies, instead, focus on the meaning and concrete manifestations of spirituality in organizations. For example, Freshman (1999) has studied the various semantic connections between ‘spirituality’ and other important concepts of organizational behavior, whereas Ashmos and Duchon (2000) have attempted to measure spirituality using sophisticated quantitative methods. Another contribution (Mitroff and Denton, 1999) reports on an extensive empirical study aimed at uncovering the attitudes towards spirituality and religious self-improvement by U.S. managers. In a similar vein, a recent study by Ashar and Lane-Maher (2004) suggests that American mid and senior level executives link the concept of success not to materialistic achievements but to being connected and to balance and wholeness. Parallel to these empirical studies, Weaver and Agle (2002) discuss the fine-tuning of descriptive studies on the relationships between religion and social behavior in organizations using insights from symbolic interactionism.

While descriptive and normative contributions dominate the literature, some critical-evaluative work on spirituality has also been done. Ackers and Preston (1997) evaluate the unintended consequences of using religious conversion ideas in management development programs. Although their work is not directly focussed on the spirituality movement, it discusses an interesting practice of spirituality, namely self-development. Bell and Taylor (2001), in turn, discuss the role of spirituality in the light of the Human Relations school of thought. For Bell and Taylor (2001), the emergence of spirituality can be set against the use of unproductive rational methods for solving problems of meaning at work. They conclude that despite the potential of spirituality for self-actualization, it is unlikely to lead, in its current form, to a radically new way of knowing and being at work. Instead, it may lead to a more insidious form of colonization of the self in the name of devotion to organizational goals. Boje (2000) shares this view suggesting that spirituality is another mask used to cover up the ruthless operations of capitalism. In his view, spirituality may be merely the latest attempt to fight alienation and deskilling without changing the basic economic relations of production and consumption that sustain the exploitative conditions at work. Yet, at the same time, for Boje, spirituality could make a difference by helping abandon corporate culturalism and the Human Relations legacy and taking a fundamentally different look at humans at work.

Such critical inflexions, although timely and important for the emerging debate on spirituality at work, are to some extent detached from the philosophical and historical culture underpinning spirituality as a concept for understanding self-formation and identity (with the notable exception of Bell and Taylor, 2003, 2004). Therefore, before we move on to elaborate our critical-evaluative view, it is useful to discuss such wider cultural and philosophical debates within which spirituality has emerged and eventually has become such a central theme.

### **Contextualizing Spirituality**

Societal, cultural and epistemological changes have given a new impetus to preoccupations with spirituality as an alternative way of life. At a societal level, spirituality reflects an embryonic yet growing distaste for materialistic ways of life and the search for alternative guidelines for more meaningful relationships. Many themes close to the spirituality movement were already introduced in the late 60s as part of the radicalization of the social climate, but they were largely forgotten in the following two decades. In recent years, the reactions against the dominance of American culture and globalization have become more prominent as different groups have begun to challenge the status quo of global capitalism (such as the environmentalist, feminist, anti-globalization movements).

The world is starting to change also in other ways: cultural diversity has received more attention and some groups that were on the very margins of society have gained a voice of their own and a more central place as politically legitimate stakeholders. Changes can be seen primarily in relation to gender identity and women's rights, but also in relation to other identities based on ethnicity, race, sexuality or religion. By no means could one talk about a sustained and fundamental attack on the dominance of the Western white male middle-class status quo but at least there are some noises, which suggest that diversity and difference are to be acknowledged as positive resources.

At an epistemological level, ultimate truths and meta-narratives are constantly challenged by the so-called critical theorists and postmodernist researchers who believe that “knowledge can only be produced in ‘small stories’ or ‘modest narratives,’ mindful of their locality in space and time and capable of adapting or disappearing as needed” (Calas and Smircich, 1999, p. 651). Researchers in these camps on both sides of the Atlantic argue that to provide ultimate/universalistic solutions to conceptualized problems is yet another attempt to institute power regimes that elevate the interests of elites by suppressing others as social constructions that hide conflict, struggles, and the messiness of the everyday life.

These shifts and transformations have had an important impact on organization and working life (P. Prasad, Mills, Elmes, and A. Prasad, 1997). The change in world economy has meant that bureaucratic structures have been often replaced with customer-focused, flexible organizations. The implication of flexible arrangements for the individuals is rather paradoxical. On the one hand, we are witnessing a change in the psychological contract towards less emotionally charged, more transactional relationships with the employer (Rousseau, 1995; Dunford, 1999). This has fostered the demand for identity-building gurus and self-help literature (Garsten and Grey 1998). Simultaneously, the customer has emerged as the new archetype of economic action: it is in the name of the customer that different policy initiatives are launched and strategic changes implemented. The consumer and the capital unite, as Bauman (2000) has noted, in an endlessly accelerating cycle of needs and satisfaction, whereas work and workers are more and more localized and deskilled to deliver only the most stable and routine parts of the global value creation process. As such, individuals are expected to adapt quickly to any work situation and to cope effectively with the threat of redundancy, job share, job transfers, and the like. The identity of the new worker is one where emotions have no role to play: for no emotional person could handle effectively such transient work scenarios.

On the other hand, we have a wealth of evidence to suggest that normative controls are replacing controls based on material, extrinsic incentives, and career progression. Such normative controls work via an intervention into the individual’s sense of the self and require the individual to be one with the company (Rose, 1990; Townley, 1994). Such interventions demand not only the mind and the body of the individual but also his/her heart, soul, and emotions. Leadership, in particular, is charged with the crucial role of “engineering culture” (Kunda, 1992) and leaders are viewed as visionary, charismatic forces, able to guide people in the right direction by using cultural symbols, emotional intelligence and the empowerment of individuals.

To a large extent, normative control views the need for self work as a symptom of the increased uncertainty and liquidity of social existence; here spiritual guidance simply reinforces the prevailing hierarchies and divisions rather than challenging them in any fundamental way. However, what we are starting to see is a new perspective on spirituality in which constant monitoring of one’s action in order to align oneself with organizational goals is suspended in favor of a more intuitive openness to the world and an unconditional involvement with the immediacy of the here and now (Mafessoli, 1996). These preoccupations with intuitiveness and immediacy seem to resonate with attempts to go beyond the rationalistic model of the self as a mind-body split that has dominated so much of the literature on the self and spirituality.

## Beyond Dualisms: The Contribution of Michel Foucault and Pierre Hadot

This paper emphasizes the contribution of Michel Foucault and Pierre Hadot to discussions on workplace spirituality: their understanding of spirituality differs from that of the mainstream management contributions in an important way. Foucault's and Hadot's studies provide examples of an alternative form of spirituality, which challenges two particular dualisms that have characterized much of the spirituality debate so far, namely the distinction between theory (in particular philosophical theorizing) and practice and the difference between religion (Christianity, in particular) and spirituality.

Hadot (1995) makes a strong claim against the view that theoretical understanding of existence (philosophical discourse, in particular) and practice are two different arenas. Although contemporary historians of philosophy are inclined to view philosophy as an abstract, theoretical activity, at its origins, philosophy (as practiced in antiquity) was in fact a method for training people to live and look at the world in new ways. As such, philosophy was a way of life whose primary aim was to help individuals and communities to transform and re-create themselves. This spiritual legacy was gradually lost, according to Hadot (1995), with the rise of Christianity, and further suppressed with the rise of modern bureaucracy. A return to the ancient roots of philosophy reminds us that philosophy is in fact an art of spiritual exercise that can help individuals to understand their place in the cosmos and regulate their emotional excesses.

In his late work, Foucault (1983) also challenges the dualism between theory and practice. For him, the identity of the individual (i.e., how one becomes a *subject*) is located in his/her engagement with concrete practices, which can be of both material and linguistic nature. The individual is, on the one hand, *subject* to the control and domination of the other and, on the other hand, the individual is a *subject* whose identity is constituted by self-knowledge. Such self-knowledge is acquired with the help of two distinct technologies of the self: self-awareness and self-formation (Foucault, 1997). Self-awareness has its origins in Christian practices, being premised on the view that there exists an inner self that can be rendered visible to the individual and the others. Knowledge of the self is achieved by turning inward and trying to discover the real self. Self-formation, on the other hand, has its origins in Greek philosophy (and associated practices of spirituality) and views the self as being formed through active engagement with itself and others. Knowledge of the self is intertwined with taking care of oneself and of the others and involves a high degree of spiritual groundwork.

As Foucault and Hadot show, in antiquity, the role of philosophy and associated discourses was not simply to produce knowledge or to empower the individuals, but more importantly to train the body and the mind to be aware of the unintended consequences of language upon action. In today's work organizations, discourses of spirituality and ethicality are aimed at making employees more effective (by enhancing their control of the situation and knowledge of the world) instead of encouraging them to open themselves up to the others or to launch a program of daily "self-formation" exercises.

Another important insight that Foucault's and Hadot's work provide relates to the role of religion, especially Christianity and its role in sustaining a certain form of spirituality. There is a

strong religious undercurrent in mainstream spirituality writings, which unfortunately lacks reflection about the unintended consequences of Christian beliefs (Delbecq 1999, 2000). There is an assumption that religiousness and spirituality are intimately tied together and that without religious aid, workplace spirituality cannot deliver what it promises. On the other hand, most of the critical accounts take an altogether oppositional stance towards the religious dimension of spirituality (Bell and Taylor, 2004). Critical voices suggest in the main that the appropriation of everyday life and mundane spirituality is complete and irreversible, and solutions to the problem of modernity are to be found elsewhere.

Foucault (1983) and Hadot (1995) go against a reading of religion as either unconditionally valid or as part of the past. Instead, they acknowledge the multifaceted character of historical shifts and the continuing influence of the traces and imprints from the past. Thus, they look not only at the Christianity-Modernity transition, but also at the complex overlaps between early Christianity and the Ancient Greek culture. According to Hadot (1995), the spiritual exercises of antiquity were rich and varied: some were practices intended to curb curiosity, anger and gossip and to ensure good moral habits. Others (see, for example, the Platonic tradition) demanded a high degree of mental concentration while others were about contemplating nature with the view to turning the soul toward the cosmos. There may have been differences in the emotional tone and notional content of these exercises but they all pursued the goal of *self-realization and self-improvement*. And the means used to achieve these goals relied on the rhetorical and dialectical techniques of persuasion and the endeavor to master one's inner dialogue and mental constructions. Such spiritual exercises invite a return to the self: here the self is liberated from the state of alienation into which it has been plunged by worries, passions, and desires. The goal is a kind of self formation, which can teach individuals to live by opening up to the other and participating in the universal nature of thought (Hadot, 1995).

Perhaps critics may want to suggest that such exercises were elitist and any attempt to bring them into the organizational arena could lead to practices that are a far cry from democracy. However, such spiritual exercises came before any hierarchies: there was no connection between one's social class and the practice of spiritual exercises. In this sense, the ethical was completely separate from the political.

Nevertheless, later modern developments have purified this early notion of Christian spirituality or secularized it in an instrumental fashion. However, we can still expect, in today's capitalist society the principles of early Christianity to offer a more tolerant shelter to mundane spirituality than the normalizing gaze of consumerism and managerialism. Indeed, experiencing the self in a different way or the pursuit of spirituality does not have to follow hegemonic discourses of management: we believe that one can have a connection to oneself and the whole without the obligatory rite of passage of the capitalist global discourse.

### **Spirituality as a Technology of the Self**

Willmot (1994, p.122) notes the need for a revised understanding of the interconnections between the spiritual, mundane practices and subjectivity in organizations. The later works of Foucault (1985, 1896) on practices of the self provide a useful perspective on the possibilities for

constituting subjectivities. Foucault argues that subjectivity is a separate dimension of a social system alongside power and knowledge, with its own history and technology. Following Nietzsche, subjectivity is here understood as a relation to oneself or as a human force working on and within itself (Foucault 1997, 225), something typically produced in practices such as education or spiritual exercises.

Foucault's technologies of the self refer to the kinds of practical self-awareness methods with the help of which individuals can grasp the mysterious side of themselves and use that experience for ethical awareness and transcendence. Technologies of the self are thus practices or arts that can make individuals aware of their inner capacities and the multitude of possibilities that transcend the limits institutions may have set upon them. If this is mainly the relation of the self with the self, Hadot hints at a more cosmic relation of the self with the others (with the whole).

Foucault (1997) illustrates technologies of the self with reference to ancient pedagogic practice. In what the Stoics called *askesis*, the aim is to train the individual by way of contrasting potential events with the likely reactions of the person. The idea is to check whether the individual can confront extreme situations and use the moral discourses. Most of all, *askesis* is a question of active preparation that can paradoxically lead to self-conscious passivity in the face of a stimulus. *Askesis* can take place in the mind (*melete*) or in an artificially induced real situation (*gymnasia*).

For example in *praemeditatio malorum*, which is a form of *melete*, one engages with what is at the outset a rather pessimistic vision of the future. The idea is that one imagines the worst that can happen, even if there is little chance that things will turn out that way. In other words, the individual chooses the horror scenario rather than a happy ending and reflects on the meaning of a catastrophe. In the examples Foucault gives, the individual imagines himself, for example, jailed or being tortured. What is peculiar with this approach is that this state of affairs is not seen as something possibly taking place in the distant future 'out there', but as already actual. Indeed, the future is brought to bear significance to the present: but practicing *askesis* does not mean that individuals are to become frightened of the future by imagining catastrophic scenarios in the present. By living through imagined scenarios, individuals can control their feelings better and reach a state of mind that allows them to picture their behavior in extreme situations.

When being out in the world, the individual can use this method, as *gymnasia*, to gauge whether to engage with a situation or not. Upon meeting a person or some other focus of attention, one constructs a development of things resulting from the engagement. By imagining the worst option to its end, an individual can see whether s/he can master a relation with the situation. The individual is in a way trying out moral rules in practice, checking if the darker side of "subjectivity" can be kept in control during the unfolding of activity. If not, there is nothing to do, and an individual can with good reason avoid becoming involved with the stimulus.

Foucault's technologies of the self have much in common with what Hadot (1995) calls spiritual exercises. But according to Hadot these spiritual exercises have also a universalistic and cosmic dimension, which Foucault does not emphasize sufficiently in his work. The practice of the spiritual exercises is likely to be rooted in traditions going back to immemorial times, but according to Hadot, it was the figure of Socrates that caused them to emerge into Western conscious-



ness. In the Socratic dialogues the question at stake was not the message being communicated but the relationship between the individuals involved in the act of dialogue. Socrates would tell those prepared to listen that the only thing he knew is that he didn't know anything. Socrates' main aim consisted in inviting his contemporaries to examine their consciousness and to care for their inner progress. As such, the Socratic dialogue is a communal spiritual exercise. In it the interlocutors are invited to participate in such inner spiritual exercises as examination of conscience and attention to oneself. Individuals are urged to comply with the dictum "Know Thyself," which invites one to establish a relationship of the self with the self - the foundations of every spiritual exercise (Hadot, 1995). Every spiritual exercise is a dialogue insofar as it is an exercise of authentic presence to oneself (and to others). That is why the relationship of the self with the self and the cosmic whole stops the dialogue from becoming a mere theoretical, dogmatic exercise and forces it to be a concrete practical exercise. For in every spiritual exercise one must let herself be changed by one's self and the other, and what counts is not the solution of a particular problem but the road traveled to reach it.

How does this differ from a modern approach of self-development? A modern approach encourages the individual to look at the future as something that enables one to move from the present state to another sphere of being. For example, a germinal book by Pedler, Burgoyne, and Boydell (1994) on management self-development encourages the individual to explore one's standing, with an eye for the unfulfilled promises and not-yet-realized potentials. The question of what one really wants is then translated into self-diagnosis according to "competencies," which is, in turn, followed by the setting up of certain goals for one's life and career. These goals represent the changed or complete self, to be reached once the corrective measures and learning has taken place.

The future is understood in modern self-development as an ideal situation that evokes a project of change in an individual. Yet it could be seen, from Foucault's and Hadot's perspective, as the creation of a rather unnecessary dissatisfaction with the prevailing experiences of the self. For example, the question frequently used in selection and development—Where do you see yourself in five years?—often has the hidden meaning of "What values do you embrace?" and "Are you prepared to follow the norm?". What is seemingly offered as a well-intentioned guideline appears more like a deliberate intervention into the everyday crafting of the self. Rather than promoting curiosity and innovation, fixing one's future in fact reifies the present by locking the making of the self into predefined images and paths.

In contrast, in technologies of the self, the future is not a projection of current ideals to imagine how things should be, but an anticipation of a real situation that the current models and morals of proper behavior may lead to. Its aim is not to escape from this world, but to prepare the individual for the worst outcomes of reasoning and discourse. It tacitly acknowledges the fact that the future is indeterminate and thus fixing it by setting a direction just closes the future off from radically new ways of life. Instead, discourses on the future can only act as ideas that help us to be more reflective about the present circumstances and the many different ways our subjectivities are formed.

The value of Foucault's example is that it shows how a rather mundane leadership development practice can be designed as a spiritual exercise that links the irrational with the rational. This is confirmed by Hadot (1992), who emphasizes the function of spiritual technologies of the self as liberation from the individuality and search for self-mastery and ethical reflectivity. Moreover, Hadot reminds us of another dimension of spirituality, one that has to do with the attempt to open up to a higher level of existence. Here, the individual, free from the individualizing bonds, can identify with a more universal "other" and that way, can become more concerned with his or her role in the whole. Thus the focus on the self paves the way to opening oneself to the human community and cosmos. This, in turn, helps us to see our impulses and passions from the grandiose perspective of universal nature and humanity, compared to which many passions may appear ridiculously insignificant.

Hadot's sympathetic remarks merely expand and strengthen the contribution of Foucault to spirituality and subjectivity. Importantly, Hadot shares with Foucault a view on the importance of the present; for Hadot, the spiritual approach calls for liberating the self both from concern about the future and from the weight of the past in order to be able to concentrate on the present moment. Contemplating the future or reflecting on the past serves only to problematize and re-form the subject in the present and to help him/her identify with the larger universe.

## **Conclusions**

In this paper we advocate a model of the subject as continuous flow emerging and being constructed not so much at the crossroad of institutions and macro-structures but from within with the help of technologies of the self. We term the latter spirituality and argue that there are strong (albeit controversial) connections between spiritual practices and Christianity. Drawing on the later work of Foucault and Hadot, we regard spirituality as rooted in the here and now and opening the way to a relationship with the inner side of the individual and with a larger cosmos. Such relationship can only take place in the present: the individual removes him/herself from the demands of the future (as posited by modern management development models) or the shackles of the past (such as tradition or religion) and makes the "self" concerned with the present. Time past and time future coalesce in the present as the subject gains a self-understanding by firmly participating in mundane practices in which the connection between the inner world and a larger cosmos is achieved.

Existing discourses of spirituality at work could benefit from such a perspective, for to release spirituality in organizations, no major change in our discursive approaches to management is needed. Foucault and Hadot are keen to stress that discourse does not exhaust the choice of different ways of life (of which spirituality is one). The spiritual exercises that people could practice at work as well as in day-to-day life can be informed by religious beliefs or they can be practiced as management development exercises. As long as the individual is keen to connect with him/herself and the others within the context of daily worries and constraints, he or she will have a better chance to find meaning at work. Spirituality is a positive emotion that serves to bring together the rational and the embodied aspects of human life while at the same time reaching to make a connection with a larger universe. To make this a guideline for human existence at work,

it is, however, necessary to understand it as an art, requiring regular exercise and constant working on one's self and one's relation to the world.

Of course, there can be no prescribed models as to how one can achieve such a scenario: so, perhaps, managerialist critics would see this approach unattainable as well as utopic. However, Foucault's and Hadot's ideas may give organizational researchers and practitioners the opportunity to reflect on existing institutionalized spiritual practices at work and may spark a debate around the construction of less conventional ways of understanding spirituality and spaces for performing them. That such spaces are ambivalent and fragile could at least ensure that they remain places for exploration rather than for further confinement of spiritual practices.

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