Spirituality in organization: a dubious idea (?)

Historically oriented sensemaking in spiritually imbued organizations∗

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A rose is a rose is a rose.
Gertrude Stein ('Sacred Emily')

Organizational spirituality is a widespread phenomenon and as such deserves the attention of academics. Of particular interest – and the focus of the paper are the internal dynamics which often drive spiritually imbued organizations (the term 'spiritual organization' will be purposefully avoided throughout the paper as burdened with troublesome implications) towards stagnated, immutable world view. I will suggest that these mechanisms may be elucidated – to a certain extent - by referring to Karl Weick's theory of sensemaking. I will also argue that this approach contributes to the explanation of certain phenomena which can be observed in such organizations, many of which are very conservative, immutable structures. Accepting the heritage of conclusions drawn by Michael Pratt in his seminal article (Pratt, 2000), I supplement his approach by adding the results from my own empirical study. I will further use them to demonstrate the inadequacy of introducing a spiritual world view into the organizational environment from a theoretical and practical perspective. Finally, it will be argued that modern organizations are not securing conditions for the successful introduction of widely understood spiritual concepts.

Introduction

The model proposed by Karl Weick (1979) denies the existence of an objective organizational environment. It is instead continuously created by the organization itself. Certain inputs are 'noticed' and 'bracketed', later serving as material from which 'plausible stories', explaining highly ambiguous and ever changing surroundings, are weaved. In this process external inputs are arranged in a pattern which enables reduction of initial ambiguity. The latter is further reduced when these particular interpretations of organizational reality are retained, lived through and acted upon by organizational actors, thus constituting organizational history, which reciprocally serves to reinforce the plausibility of selected 'stories' - enacted interpretations of reality. Assumptions which rule the selection of a particular set of stories are, naturally, of crucial importance. While it is fundamental to explore reasons for adopting a particular set of organizational assumptions in the case of organizations which address spiritual matters (the task, which has been to a large extent neglected in academic writings), it is equally important to study internal dynamics created by those assumptions once they are adopted. The former presents a challenge which by far exceeds the scope of our analysis. Regarding the latter, however, some introductory conclusions will be drawn mostly from empirical case studies. It will be argued that organizations which attempt to approximate spirituality are often inclined to apply selection mechanisms which, in many cases, once adopted, become particularly difficult to change and impede any attempt to adapt to changing external and internal conditions.[5] Such organizations are often

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[5] The ontological assumptions of Weick's theory are neither shared nor disputed in this article. For instance, it is not the author's intention to argue for or against objectivity of organizational environment. In

unable to react to emerging opportunities and, perhaps more importantly, they find it very difficult to respond to threats. Buried in their past, cherishing the choices which they made, reproducing continuously the same enacted conditions, being preoccupied with their history, they loose wider perspective and become buried in their antiquarian past (Nietzsche, 1983).

However, in order to comprehend these processes, it is imperative to outline the origins of the concept of organizational spirituality, to exemplify its modern applications in the organizational world and, even more importantly, to attempt to explain our understanding of spirituality.

Origins

Although spirituality is a concept similar to other universals like *goodness* or *freedom* and hence lacking direct material reference, throughout the course of history it was in many ways asserted that it in fact may and does contribute to one quite tangible aspect of human conduct, namely economic activity. Max Weber explicitly argued that there is a relation between the religious beliefs of a particular individual and

turn, Weick's epistemology is of more interest since it helps to infer what organization regards as knowledge (about 'what is out there' and 'how does it affect us') and what criteria for knowledge construction are used by organizations. Weick's model is not adopted as lenses through which author perceives and describes organizational world. It is rather its descriptive properties regarding certain organizational processes (reduction of ambiguity, arrangement of external inputs, retention of particular explanations of 'reality', etc.) which are found particularly enlightening since they seem to take a peculiar turn, in terms of intensity and direction, in organizations dealing with spiritual issues. Enactment theory in this article is not taken for granted as a whole. Hence, the author is not bound to take on sensemaking perspective and to use Weickian concepts consistently throughout the paper. Thus, whenever e.g. possibility of 'changing external conditions' is discussed, it is not inconsistent with the theoretical perspective adopted by the author.

his social and economic actions (Weber, 1930). According to Weber, followers of the Protestant faith are particularly inclined to achieve economic success because the advantageous outcome of their strivings was allegedly the sign of the God's grace. For Calvinists there was no causal link between human action and winning divine grace, i.e. a human's actions were not capable of influencing God's will, yet still their favourable result (e.g. wealthy living) was seen as an indication that they were redeemed. This theory was, however, more descriptive than prescriptive. The link between materiality (accumulation of wealth) and spirituality (transcendent strivings and beliefs) was shown by Weber; still, negative moral valuation of materialism and hedonism as obstacles to spiritual happiness, was provided later. Erich Fromm reversed the argumentation: where Weber didn't express evaluative judgments and saw positive correlation between transcendent beliefs and materiality, Fromm actually did evaluate and saw negative correlation between focus on materiality and spiritual fulfillment. Fromm claimed that material goods which humans strive to acquire, end up owning *them*; possessors become driven by their possessions (Fromm, 1976). To avoid this consequence, which Fromm calls living in the 'having' mode, he proposes a turn towards a radically different mode of life: 'being'. It may be seen as the rejection of materialistic lenses through which many people tend to label themselves ('I have') and adoption of the perspective which entails defining a person in terms of their actions ('I am'). What matters here is not what a person has, but who s/he strives to become, what s/he tries to achieve and how s/he develops. Somewhat similar conclusions may be drawn from the works of Abraham Maslow, one of the founding fathers of humanistic psychology. His most famous legacy includes the highly acclaimed *hierarchy of needs*, where human needs of the lower four levels (physiological, safety, love and esteem) have to be gradually satisfied if one is to achieve satisfaction of the need for

self-actualization which crowns the pyramid [actually Maslow inserted two additional levels on the top, cognitive and aesthetic needs, but in common academic teaching they are often omitted (Maslow, 1970)].

Maslow claimed that those who have the privilege of reaching the self-actualization level may sometimes experience transcendence and a feeling of connection to all human kind (Maslow, 1971). Striving for transcendence, belongingness and feeling of interrelatedness with the whole world were important aspects of spiritual literature focused on the workplace context, which begun to emerge in 1980s and became increasingly popular in the 1990s. Consequently numerous authors (e.g. Milliman, Pfeffer, Dehler, Steingard, etc.) directed their interest towards the ways in which organizations might satisfy claims resulting from our nature as it was seen in the humanistic perspective. In the 1990s over 300 books (52 of them in 1997) and more that 100 articles were published on that subject (Biberman, 2003).

Spiritual practices in organizations

Given the huge variety of ways in which spirituality is defined in the literature and practice, it is not surprising that practices occurring in modern workplaces which are commonly characterized as spiritual vary substantially and include: meditation, breathing exercises, yoga, chanting, visualization, dancing, prayer and other meditation practices, storytelling, aromatherapy, drawing, various games (impersonating animals or certain people), sharing feelings, reading, shamanic journeying, participating in group tasks, spending time alone (retreats) and in large gatherings. All of them aim to develop body and soul and to unite them. Many of them require physical, emotional and spiritual engagement. Most of them are not introduced in isolation. Usually more than one of them is used at a time (Bell and Taylor 2004; Delbecq, 2000).

Numerous examples of the growing interest of modern organizations in spiritual issues are easy to find. Pizza Hut, Wal-Mart and Taco Bell organize 'God squads', which consist of priests and which are ready to advise employees on spiritual issues and to secure spiritual consolation 24 hours a day. Xerox funds trips to American deserts for its employees, where they meditate and gain inspiration from their inner selves to invent new designs for Xerox's products and in this way contribute to company's success. Tom's of Maine invites various spiritual leaders to meetings with employees and Ben & Jerry underlines the importance of spiritual balance not just with respect to its relations with the staff (e.g. official company mourning in case of death of a relative of one of the employees), but also with the surrounding environment (by making their products sustainable). The World Bank employees not only take regular spiritual refuge in inaccessible areas of the world, but also take part in weekly discussions on spiritual issues. Southwest Airlines are known for establishing 'love and soul' as their spiritual base. One of the corporate goals of Servicemaster is to 'Honor God in all we do', which in practice means e.g. that all employees have an equal share. Monsanto introduces his employees to the art of Buddhist meditation. Deloitte & Touche organizes prayer groups. One of Florida-based law firms sponsors Torah lessons for the employees, so does one of New York law offices. Well known for introducing spiritual elements to their organizational culture are also such firms as Medtronic Inc. and Biogenex, as well as European enterprises such as BP, GlaxoSmithKline and Shell (Conlin, 1999).

Given the variety of approaches to organizational spirituality and multiplicity of spiritual methods and techniques it is important to attempt to elucidate the meaning of the very notion of spirituality before we move any further.

'What is spirituality?'

If we ask this question we may simply mean that we would like to know what someone else thinks it is, i.e. we are not interested in knowing what it 'really' is, we just want to have a chat or conduct an interview for our research on that subject.

However, posing a question of this kind would normally mean that we want to know the truth about a certain object. I claim that the response to this question may be complicated or simple, depending on what we expect from the answer. If the only answer which would satisfy us has the form of '*S* is *X*', if we look for a specific object which corresponds to what we define, we are almost done answering this question. Such an attitude would imply that we take the truth to be the appropriateness of the relation between an object and the statement about that object (e.g. it is truth that 'snow is white', when snow is white). However, as I will attempt to show in the following discussion, in case of the notion of 'spirituality' the only genuine and direct correspondence we can count on is relative to the individual. This was the simple way to deal with the problem. Spirituality is what we take it to be. Spirituality is 'spirituality'.

Although leaving an issue at this stage would provide us with a tempting maze of subjectivity, I do not think that it is a way in which most of us would put the question and that it is not the kind of answer we would hope to get. That every human being has his/her own personal truth may be in itself true (or not), but (in either case) it makes regular research of the phenomenon of organizational spirituality only harder, not easier. For this reason we might instead be tempted to look at the issue from the point of view of coherence theory, which says that truth may refer to the whole range of statements in the system and that a proper fit of elements within this system constitutes the truth. In fact, this is the viewpoint which I will now take. Still, it wouldn't get us too far if we abided by the monistic view that there is only one system in which truth may be found, since our research perspective would be inevitably sentenced to life imprisonment within predefined confines. However, if we

disagree with the monistic account of the problem (of the Spinozian kind) and if we apply a subjectivist ingredient to it, we will get a range of thought systems which may differ in terms of truth claims they support, but which may still hold that these claims are true within the systems as long as they fit in with the other parts of it. In such a case we may hold that certain statements and definitions are valid in relation to certain views shared by particular groups of individuals (to limit our discussion to humans), or by different domains of science, while they may be automatically dismissed by some other group or domain. Psychological automatisms of validation and dismissal derived from these truth claims existing within given groups or domains are of particular interest here.

What 'a group' means is not defined here rigorously. We could maintain that the group is formed by all those who validate a particular paradigm, in a sense similar to the one proposed by Kuhn (1962) or by those who apply a similar pattern of sensemaking processes (Weick, 1979). For the purposes of the following discussion I would only like to claim the following: although individuals tend to differ between each other in respect of truth claims that they are inclined to accept as necessary characteristics of particular concepts or objects, they are also likely to form social settings in which they generally share similar patterns of validation of meaning of these concepts. It would probably hardly surprise us if concepts such as 'matter', 'soul', 'nature' or 'God' held by physicists, Amway distributors, and spiritual trainers working for modern businesses differed, and were at the same time quite consistently shared within these groups. As shall be demonstrated, we can count on a similar effect regarding the concept of 'spirituality'. In the realm of coherence theory, meaning emerges when something is defined as 'a notion', by an individual who forms the part of some group - a larger social setting characterized by distinctive manners of accepting certain truth claims - e.g. church - as a result of which the

mediated notion originates: (a notion). Thus, let us put it this way: spirituality is 'spirituality' (is spirituality).

(Meta)characteristics

Spirituality is defined in numerous ways:

'A subjective experience of the sacred' (Vaughn, 1991: in Giacalone and Jurkiewicz, 2003)
'The personal expression of ultimate concern' (Emmons, 2000: in Giacalone and Jurkiewicz, 2003)
'The presence of a relationship with a higher power that affects the way in which one operates in the world' (Armstrong, 1995: in Giacalone and Jurkiewicz, 2003)
'The animating force that inspires one toward purposes that are beyond one's self and that give one's life meaning and direction' (McKnight, 1984: in Giacalone and Jurkiewicz, 2003)
'Our response to a deep and mysterious human yearning for self-transcendence and surrender, a yearning to find our place.' (Benner, 1989: in Giacalone and Jurkiewicz, 2003)
'A transcendent dimension within human experience' (Shafranske and Gorsuch, 1984: in Giacalone and Jurkiewicz, 2003)
'A personal life principle which animates a transcendent quality of relationship with God' (Emblen, 1992: in Giacalone and Jurkiewicz, 2003)
'The human dimension that transcends the biological, psychological, and social aspects of living' (Mauritzen, 1988: in Giacalone and Jurkiewicz, 2003)
'The vast realm of human potential dealing with ultimate purposes, with higher entities, with God, with life, with compassion, with purpose' (Tart, 1975: in Giacalone and Jurkiewicz, 2003)
'Spirituality is the expression of spirit, [...] which is the form of energy' (Dehler and Welsh, 2003)
'The area of searching, asking important questions, receptiveness, openness, softness and flexibility in life.'*6*
'A moral attitude towards yourself and other people, which is opened to the world and has a direct connection with the divine.'7
'Human striving to achieve the state of mind which is more perfect. It is related to self-perfection, an active search of excellence.'8

There are some common threads in these definitions. Stability and immutability seem not to be an option here. All of them are genuinely dynamic: even if they refer to more static concepts like *moral attitude* or *human dimension* they stress their transformative aspects, respectively open to the external and going beyond certain levels of existence. In most cases dynamism is formulated quite directly: expression, energy, striving, searching and animating force are among most frequently occurring terms. Thus, *dynamism* seems to be among the distinguishing characteristics of definitions of spirituality. So is *transcendence*, which indicates that dynamism is generally (although not without some exceptions) directed towards 'there' as opposed to 'here'. Materiality, when transcended drives us towards *immateriality* which seems to be another important thread. Some of the definitions touch on the

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6   Maria's statement (material from the author's research)
7   Piotr's statement, ibid.
8   Lukasz's statement, ibid.

subject of relation to *God* or *Higher Being*, in any case to some form of superior perfection. Such perfection is sometimes located by these definitions inside the human being, which means that every step toward spirituality translates into furthering our *self-perfection* or personal development (and vice versa). Not getting involved into discussing the relation between spirituality and religion, let us note here that these two are generally seen as separate (for thorough discussion see: Mitroff, 2003; Mitroff and Denton, 1999), which has also been confirmed in my research.

Thus, spirituality is not construed as being the same as religion. Dynamism, immateriality, transcendence, self-perfection and belief in higher power seem to be the outstanding characteristics common to most of its definitions.

What seems to be striking, however, is not how much these approaches have in common, but rather how they are different from each other. Notions such as power, relation, experience, area, attitude or feeling used in these formulations indicate quite substantial confusion around the issue of spirituality. These definitions may be divided according to location of the active factor. Hence, spirituality may be understood internalistically as a way in which an individual conceives the world and acts upon it, or externalistically as the manner in which the world exerts its influence upon the individual. Definitions of spirituality may be inclined to underscore ethics and morality as factors which must be found in activities of spiritual actors, or they may depart from the realm of human actions towards some transcendent relationship with the divine and the universe. We have indicated above some characteristics which seem to be common for most of approaches to spirituality. However, spirituality seems to be something (a thing, an experience or practice) which is described in so many ways and by so many terms that all characteristics which have been pointed out previously may be merely treated as tracking points, as indicators that whatever

is occurring or is being told of, if refers to them, has in some way to do with spiritual issues. The multiplicity of these tracking points, in turn, leads us to the only description of spirituality which seems properly minimalist, as an ultimate inclusiveness concerning a whole variety of aspects, issues or points of view. Hence I shall take *openness* towards various viewpoints as the metacharacteristic of spirituality.

Definition of such concepts like *freedom*, *goodness* or, for that matter, *spirituality*, should never be taken as complete. There is always a possibility that within a given context of a group (as we understood it above) which seems to attribute to them similar meanings, some new element will be added, thus influencing the content of internal agreement. Meanings are fluent, 'the river-bed of thoughts may shift' (Wittgenstein, 1969/1999). Even a physical object, e.g. a chair, may be viewed in numerous ways depending on who views it: quantum physicist will mostly see empty spaces between sparsely scattered atoms, an idealist philosopher may claim that the object as such isn't real and exists in our minds only, while a furniture salesman (or his client) will be interested in the pragmatic and perhaps aesthetic characteristics of the object as a possible place to rest. Hence, it seems that these groups employ their own and separate meaning attribution and sensemaking processes.

Instead of contributing to growing confusion over the definition of spirituality, I find it far more appropriate to refer to an *open question argument* (Moore, 1903), which is the claim that some notions are simply indefinable. This is not to maintain that I would rather not define it in order to avoid making a mistake, but that attempting a definition would already be committing a mistake, since the notion of spirituality is genuinely indefinite. I see no reason to prove this point further than by pointing out that no definition has so far gained an exceptional popularity, none of those which have been proposed seems particularly

convincing, and in my research I have never encountered two opinions on this subject which were not substantially different from each other. It seems that spirituality as such cannot be comprehensively defined. And that *indefiniteness* is the second and final metacharacteristic that can be attributed to this notion.

As previously said, different groups, notably physicists and philosophers, differ in the ways in which they attribute meanings to certain notions. But, to use the example given before, they still sit on chairs! It points towards a peculiar social phenomenon: namely that some minimum level of inter-group agreement with respect to the necessities of our lives actually exists. Still, this level will vary depending on the kind of 'object' we refer to. In the case of objects which most people have contact with on an everyday basis, the degree of free choice with respect to the way in which we come into interaction with them is substantially limited. It is imaginable that a particularly obstinate subjective idealist regularly keeps ignoring walls and chairs as non-existent objects in the course of his ordinary actions, even if such behaviour would inevitably bring about deplorable social consequences. However, when approaching universals, which not only lack direct material correspondence but also any straightforward empirical referent (unlike *green* for example), such as *spirituality*, our degree of freedom is far greater. What we will understand by these terms will not normally be the factor of crucial importance for our social setting. The 21st century societies living in developed countries will normally tolerate extravagant attributions of meaning to this notion. Our behaviour (even if uncommon) derived from our interpretation of the notion will rarely result in severe social sanctions. And usually if such sanctions occur, they will be scrutinized by public opinion and applicable law with suspicion of intolerance, violation of human rights, etc. Whether we see the world as full of spiritually interconnected powers, associate spirituality with ethics, or

associate it with nothing at all (and act accordingly) will normally not exert particular influence on our social standing. As long as it doesn't threaten general security or doesn't infringe shared cultural standards, social attitude is generally inclusive and open towards different grasps of spirituality. Inclusiveness and openness are distinguishable in this context precisely because of huge differences in views on spirituality between individuals despite some common characteristics (or tracking points) which we mentioned. Social setting in which we experience spirituality is usually permissive and, in itself, open towards it.

It follows from the very nature of the concept of spirituality that it is essentially an open notion which lacks definiteness and to which various meanings can be attributed by different (groups of) individuals without causing severe social tensions.

I further claim that if a notion, practice or issue possessing these two attributes is to be applied in any specific setting; this setting would have to secure appropriate conditions if such application has to work out properly. Thus, to make workplace spirituality a successful project, allowing organizations and their employees to reap various benefits on personal and institutional level, the workplace itself must be designed, deliberately or not, in a sufficiently inclusive, open and unrestrained manner to make approximation of open and indefinite spirituality viable. Whether organizations may fulfill these conditions is an issue which can't be decided here, but subsequent considerations will aim to push the discussion on that subject a little further.

Why workplace spirituality

There seem to be three (although some authors claim there are more, e.g. Ashmos and Duchon, 2000), main reasons for current interest in spirituality in the workplace context (Giacalone and Jurkiewicz, 2003). The first is related to the increasing instability of modern workplaces caused by the decreasing demand for

human labour in certain industries (e.g. due to the introduction of new less labour intensive technologies and general inclination towards downsizing or reengineering). This could have negative psychological influence on employees: disappointment and fear of a highly unpredictable outer world, alienation and low self esteem are among symptoms which are most likely to appear. As a result, employees may turn towards immateriality and transcendence where they find reassurance which was lacking in their lives (ibid.).

The second group of causes is linked to global change with respect to values which takes place in today's business world. A growing number of enterprises stress the importance of values such as self-development and realization of human potential instead of applying purely materialistic incentives (Mitroff and Denton, 1999). Many companies also emphasize the importance of an empathic approach when it comes to business relations with other enterprises. Hence, a growing interest of the corporate world in CSR, business ethics and stakeholder theory.

Finally, it is often claimed that an increased interest in Eastern philosophies and religions plays a role. Some authors (e.g. Ashmos and Duchon, 2000) maintain that this interest is due to the aging of the baby-boomers generation, now in their 50s or early 60s, who pay more attention to immaterial values, meditation practices and transcendence, and who form an essential part of the modern corporate establishment. Let us note here that all above mentioned reasons need not to be considered separately. There may be some kind of causal relation between the first two groups. The existence of the reasons of the first kind entails that the second will appear, namely that organizations take interest in spirituality *because* their employees are disappointed with insufficiency of material compensation which they receive for their work. It could also be claimed that the third group (spiritual attitudes of the seniors of the corporate hierarchy) exerts influence upon

the second (related to company's spiritual policies). Thus, instead addressing the issue from categorizing point of view discerning particular groups of factors, we may suggest the existence of a certain mechanism, which translates augmenting commitment to spiritual issues at the level of individuals into functioning of today's organizations.

Affirmative vs. Critical

Most of the literature relating to spirituality in the organizational context suggests numerous incentives to integrate spirituality in the workplace and is focused on the positive aspects of the issue, which commonly highlights various benefits on organizational and individual level [the approach which some scholars regarded as 'seeing the light' (Boje and Rosile, 2003)]. Major streams in this 'positive' literature pertain to such issues as the advantages of the spiritual point of view over materialistic and mechanistic approaches (Gull and Doh, 2004), spiritual dimensions of the workplace (Pfeffer, 2003), the ways in which spirituality can be taught and successfully implemented in the organizational setting (Dellbecq, 2000), qualitative description of various mutations of spiritually imbued organizations and manners in which they surpass the non-spiritual ones (Mitroff and Denton, 1999), attempts at quantitative analysis of this superiority (Lee D-J. et al., 2003; Achmos and Duchon, 2000), practical implications and advantages of including the supreme power (God) in organizational practice (Schwartz, 2006), metaphysical foundations of workplace spirituality (Steingard, 2005), impact of achieving higher states of consciousness on organizational performance (Harung, et al., 1996), link between spirituality and competitive advantage (Neck and Milliman, 1994), benefits for the community building (Mirvis, 1997) and profits from introducing spirituality in the context of organizational change (Dehler and Welsh, 1994). One of the outstanding examples of this *affirmative* literature on workplace spirituality describes

unrivalled benefits for Human Resource Management: as some of the most prominent scholars in the field have claimed, 'the data suggest strongly that those organizations that identify more strongly with spirituality […] have employees who (1) are less fearful of their organizations, (2) are far less likely to compromise their basic beliefs and values in the workplace, (3) perceive their organizations as significantly more profitable, and (4) report that they can bring significantly more of their complete selves to work, specifically their creativity and intelligence' (Mitroff and Denton, 1999). These benefits, as some studies claim, can have direct material implications, since they result in improved bottom line (Zinnbauer et al., 1999).

However, this 'positive' literature is being treated by many, and not without reason, as highly hypothetical, not meeting the requirements of scientific rigor (Giacalone et al., 2003) and marked by the scarcity of empirical results (Rego and Pina e Cunha, 2008). In fact, even some of the empirical studies which were actually conducted, do not fully confirm that these positive results will occur. Our discussion will further show why it might be the case.

Less numerous but nonetheless present in literature are accounts of the problem of workplace spirituality that, to simplify metaphorically, can be seen as concerned with the 'dark side' of organizations. Here the introduction of spirituality in organizational context is regarded as disturbance (Smith, 1996) and can be seen as a potential source of pathologic behaviours (Forray and Stork, 2002). Negative effects that such studies claim to discern include mental isolation of participants of spiritualized organizations (Pratt, 2000). Some researchers suggested that there are possible implications of workplace spirituality for exercising control over a company's employees, manipulating meaning, managing communication channels, suppressing resistance against, and gaining employee's acceptance of various corporate policies (Bell and Taylor,

2004). Spirituality may also be seen as helping to preserve an unjust and exploitative socio-political and economic order (Gallhofer and Haslam, 2004) and can exert disciplinary, patriarchal influence upon employees (Nadesan, 1999). As one scholar noted, current affirmative interest in the organizational spirituality may be seen as 'an ideological attempt to capture the power of religion for the purposes of supporting capitalist interests' (Bell, 2008).

Can it work?

One could argue that modern discourse on spirituality may very well be described as Baudrillard's third level simulacra, which substitutes for a reality which simply 'is no longer there' (Baudrillard, 1976). It would entail that the remedy for the Debord's 'spectacle' (Debord, 1995) was found in just another form of irrationality, the one which is much harder to denounce than in the case of social relationships mediated by images. Spiritual discourse is mediated mostly by the invisible and thus utterly unverifiable. The whole discourse of the emerging organizational spirituality seems to be constructed around the claim that we should put greater effort in the invisible, because with sufficient work (properly done) it will in some way feed us back with marvelous results. The claim that spiritual workplaces should fulfill certain conditions, such as inclusiveness and lack of restraint, in order to make approximation of spiritual openness and indefiniteness possible may seem to be in some respect satisfied if means-ends causation is interrupted and some degree of vagueness steps in. Wouldn't it quite nicely resemble the indefinableness of a biblical reward which is to be expected in some imaginary future, brought a step closer down to earth and intertwined into managerial claims for higher efficiency? Would that work? Not necessarily, I should say. What functions well in the realm of religion, when put in the organizational context may, intentionally or not, create opportunity for a great fraud.

Imagine an organization that lacks any tangible means to assess the actual linkage between the efforts put by the individual (organizational actor) and the role played by the circumstances (workplace context with all its limitations) with the outcomes (degree of achievement of certain goals). It could potentially create a very powerful mechanism able to justify nearly every harmful result of its activity as caused by independent factors. The mechanism which would be capable of internal absolution from every committed sin and thus of any feeling of obligation towards employees or business partners. It may not sound like a desired outcome of application of spirituality in the workplace, but in some cases this is exactly what happens. In a spiritual enterprise that I have studied, a vegetarian restaurant, one of the bosses performed 'mental scanning' of his employees from the distance of over 200 miles to assess whether the food they prepare is energetically positive. If he recognized it was not, the cook was rebuked and in some cases immediately laid off on the basis of the insufficient energy potential that he was endowed with. There was no evidence that such an employee could possibly produce to prove his innocence that could not be easily rejected in the realms of spiritual discourse assumed in that organization. Every argument might easily be dismissed e.g. as inspired by the evil forces or simply as a product of insufficient spiritual development (the cook apparently did not 'grow up' to cherish the cosmic energy value of the food he prepared). This is not to say that actors who have some superiority in spiritually imbued organizational context will regularly take advantage of the possibility to undertake an abusive action towards those who occupy a lower place in the hierarchy, but what needs to be emphasized here, is that in this case such possibility is quite apparent.

One of the major reasons why manipulation may be particularly harmful here is that when a person newly adopts behavioural norms complying with the organizational conditions mentioned above, s/he may start developing various rationalizations to justify his/her actions. As some scholars have noted, in the case of members of spiritually imbued organizations 'their self image requires a convincing motive. The most readily available explanation is the conviction that their actions made sense, and were freely chosen' (Tourish and Pinnington, 2002). It is always hard to confirm such a claim, but it seemed to be the case in a different organization I studied, a chain of clothing stores, in which the manager instructed all his employees to participate in spiritual courses. Those who opposed lost their jobs. One of the 'survivors' explained later that since then she got so much interested in spiritual issues that she attends every weekly meditation meeting with her boss. It was quite common for the respondents in another study to maintain that their interest in spiritual issues came deeply from within, although it was independently confirmed that they didn't make any steps on their spiritual path until they joined a particular organization.

However, sometimes it goes much further. In another case from my research, members of a voluntary based organization internalized spiritual teachings of their Master (Guru) so deeply that everything that occurred in that organization was automatically taken by them as having inner, transcendent and inexplicable importance. Every action happened for a reason. Every event was sacred. Even some, from a managerial point of view, utterly dysfunctional behaviour of participants e.g. law breaking actions of top management causing substantial financial and reputation losses or obvious systemic flaws e.g. practically non existent communication channels, was treated as an indispensable carrier of some higher meaning. For example, lack of communication between various branches and between national and international levels of management was supposedly serving the higher purpose of teaching people how to take care for themselves.

Everything happened out of necessity. If organizations adopt this viewpoint, 'the way becomes the only way, the subjective becomes objective, practices become sanctified as norms, *is* becomes *ought.*' (Ashforth and Vaidyanath, 2002). Thus, organizational flaws were no longer errors to be corrected. They were granted a holy space in the minds of participants, often repeatedly justified during various gatherings and informal meetings and given substantial meaning not even simply in relation to this particular organization but, in the end, with regards to the whole world. Therefore, any initiatives to change the situation were viewed with suspicion, much like attempts to defy the 'higher power'. There were, however, clear cues presented by some 'mutineers' that much of this sanctified confusion was quite instrumentally developed by a tiny group of members who derived very material profits from it.

Other researchers found that organizations led by transformational leaders are often inclined to imbue the workplace with spiritual discourse (Tourish and Pinnington, 2002) and that, as in case of the vegetarian restaurant mentioned above, in such instances organizational success is frequently attributed to the correctness of the organizational model, while any failure is always attributed to external factors. It creates a basis for the ideology which can never be denied: all events whether conducive to organizational success or not, always confirm it. In Michael Pratt's study of Amway, a direct selling company supposedly based on Christian principles, it was argued that organizations which apply specific sensemaking processes which preclude the possibility of admitting a mistake create mental fortresses inside which no external arguments are valid. Each event which contradicts the corporate ideology undergoes a scrupulous sensemaking procedure and consequently turns out to confirm it. Similarly, in Amway's case, the lack of success in distributor's activity is presented as 'God's will', continuous staying in the organization by those who already achieved success and are financially independent is translated as 'serving the higher purpose' and mutiny against the supervisor is portrayed as 'a work of a devil' (Pratt, 2000). Organization freezes in a self-confirming loop of evidence.

When holistic image (in which comprehension of separate parts in never enough to understand the whole) of the world in which organization plays an indispensable, sacred role is provided cleverly enough to exert effective control over participant's mental sensemaking processes, as it was in Amway's case, what actually happens may easily be presented as what should or even must have happened. Thus, allowing it to happen repeatedly. In such cases '[…]sacralizing imbues the instrumental with moral authority creating the resource for the organization enabling for manipulation' (Ashforth and Vaidyanath, 2002).

Tracks of organizational thinking become frozen in antiquarian stillness.

What may here be the key to organizational 'success' is not only a skillful manipulation but also historically-oriented coherence with which spiritual worldview is applied. Once adopted, the spiritual model is immutable and its characteristics almost impossible to amend. In many cases organizations which strive to approximate spirituality (re)create an unpredictable setting, which is flooded with unverifiable claims, thus forming an irrefutable ideology. In the case of the vegetarian restaurant mentioned previously, every aspect of functioning is submitted to scrupulous control and is given general direction by one of the co-founders, also known as a clairvoyant, who claims to have immense spiritual powers, while the role of the second associate mostly consists in direct supervision, execution and making minor operational decisions. Every important action is undertaken in strict agreement with the first of them and generally he is the one who exerts influence on every aspect of organizational functioning. Recruitment of employees and their careers are strictly

spiritually controlled: only those who reach certain energy minimum are accepted, promotions and rises in wages are contingent upon general energy fit into the whole organization and, as mentioned before, discharges are also decided in accordance with similar criteria. Each decision regarding organizational environment such as which business contacts should be established and which should not are also dependent upon the greater picture, inconceivable, at least for the employees, cosmic order and not the economic calculus (it happens often that a more expensive option is selected even though nothing seems to support it). While all the above are typically controlled from the distance (as mentioned before clairvoyant-associate lives in a different part of the country), occasionally the associate actually appears in the restaurant in order to imbue the workplace with energy (e.g. by performing certain spiritual ceremonies or reading holy texts aloud, such as *Ashtavakra Gita*, while all the meals are being prepared) and to advise which spices or ingredients should be used for the particular meal. He doesn't explain the grounds for this advice. He doesn't have to. According to his own words, he 'just knows'9. And his knowledge, along with all its applications, as grounded in some insensible, otherworldly and higher order is automatically excluded from possibility of any kind of verification. Hence, he is also 'authorized' to easily dismiss any claims derived from different order of reality perceived as 'inferior'. Thus, spiritual rhetoric and sensemaking contributes to the stiffness of the organizational model.

It may be argued that a spiritually imbued organization does not necessarily have to apply such rigid rules; that inflexibility should not be perceived as their indispensable characteristic. I will, however, claim that an open, unrestrained and flexible organizational model may be inherently unsustainable if applied in spiritually oriented organization. Certain cases from

my research confirm this contention. The one discussed below is most appropriate for the goals of this discussion because it enables for close comparison with the one previously mentioned.

In another case study of a different vegetarian restaurant which used to operate in the same town, no particular spiritual rigor was enforced and spiritual employees (participants of various courses, devoted followers of spiritual traditions, etc.) were mixed with those who were not at all interested in these issues. Employees only shared an idea of important role which vegetarianism plays in the preservation of human health and all sympathized with the vision of helping the whole humanity. The working environment was very lax. Transcendental issues were very often discussed and weekly spiritual meetings of employees were organized, but the decision making processes were quite typical and based on tangible factors. It soon occurred that efforts of spiritual employees to keep the place running substantially diminished as they lost particular interest in material rewards and often chose to spend more time taking care of their own spiritual growth instead of cooking and serving meals. As the owner attempted to put some disciplinary mechanisms in place, disillusionment gradually crept in and most of the spiritual employees left. The owner decided to close down and so the spiritual experiment has failed.

Differences between these two cases probably consist to a large extent in the quality of management and multiple tiny details which are hard to grasp for the outside observer. Substantial lack of control over employees and the boss's inability to enforce desired behaviour (one of the spiritual waiters in the second restaurant was found reading a newspaper and constantly ignoring the clients) could be encountered in many organizations. Yet, we should point out the comparative similarity of initial circumstances in both cases, important differences in management's approach to establishing tolerated degree of openness and flexibility and final outcomes

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9   Mr. Janusz's statement, ibid.

of these two processes (the first restaurant still thrives on a very demanding market, while the second one is long forgotten). Although it would be premature to draw far reaching conclusions relying on rather modest empirical material heretofore gathered, it should be noted that attempting to appropriate a flexible and unrestrained workplace environment in prospering (spiritually informed) organization subjected to typical market pressures, may occur to be an immensely challenging task.

Having in mind all the reservations towards the issue of workplace spirituality which have already been made I would like to add one of ethical nature. When the project of spiritually imbued workplace in which employees take part not so much for the company's sake but for their own personal development achieves its goal on the organizational level (employee's retention and effectiveness rises and bottom line improves) and with respect to the individual (who truly believes that commitment to a particular workplace helps him/her evolve), it will greatly reduce the likelihood of justification of employee's refusal to engage in any of the company's initiatives. Including the initiatives which interfere with some of the aspects of his/her personal life. An employee would find it much harder to oppose the demand to increase his/her commitment in professional issues at the cost of his/her non-work occupations if such commitment is convincingly introduced as an opportunity for personal development. Research confirms that in some environments heightened employee's commitment and his/her consent to work long hours may be achieved by introducing a workplace context which may seemingly have an inverse connection to work intensity, such as work-as-a-play setting (Costea et al., 2007). And if it is hard to refuse to play when at the same time it secures a certain material level of our existence, how much harder is it to reject the opportunity of spiritual development? Much harder probably and certainly more research on that subject

would bring invaluable insight to the phenomenon of organizational spirituality.

Conclusion

Is it at all possible for spirituality to feel at home in an organizational setting? As we have seen, numerous examples indicate that some level of coexistence is possible. However, very often claims that spirituality may contribute to long term reliability of organizational functioning are not fully justified. Should it be so, it would demand extraordinary cautiousness and deep understanding of the human psyche on the part of those who introduce spirituality to the organizational context, because, I contend, it is not its natural habitat. Let us keep in mind that the notion of spirituality to which we refer possesses attributes of indefiniteness and openness. For organizations which take part in the competitive market race it will be a considerable challenge to preserve these attributes by creating an unrestrained and fully inclusive organizational culture. Some examples from my research suggest that it may not necessarily be advantageous from the economic point of view. As we have also seen, organizations which strive to approximate the condition of indefiniteness may either turn into an ultimate chaos or produce potentially exploitative circumstances where all employee's claims may be easily dismissed.

Spiritual discourse may also create potential for abusive actions with respect to employees and some organizations may find such temptation hard to resist. Voluntary based organizations may often find it easier to avoid turning indefiniteness into vagueness covering abusive practices since they are usually not subjected to huge market pressures. Still, as my research suggests, even in this case such danger exists.

Spirituality may serve the organization as a tool to preserve not only the 'most efficient way of doing things', but also to ensure that this way will not be

challenged, because the manner of justification suggests that such a change would violate some higher otherworldly order. This way, I claim, particular elements of the organizational puzzle become justified by the very structure of spiritual argumentation. Organizational order is granted a higher meaning which immunizes it against any outside influence. And thus becomes untouchable. Any infringement in it is no longer perceived as a simple breach of conduct or a plain mistake. It becomes a sin. The sinner may either purify himself by accepting organizational order and his repentance and conversion may be used to confirm righteousness of the model or he may be expelled thus 'purifying' the organization and solidifying cohesion among its members. In either case 'correctness' of the model is 'confirmed'. Here new impulses to amend processes of 'noticing' and 'bracketing' in the 'enactment' stage as well as new dynamics underlying the 'selection' process hardly ever appear. As we have seen, organizations which approximate spiritual methods and/or adopt elements of spirituality in their world view may easily become epistemologically rigid, use only ready made recipes and be equally conservative in acquiring new information as in their processing.

I will contend that rigid and conservative reception of reality, immutability of modes to act upon it and the historically oriented antiquarian approach demonstrated by many spiritually imbued organizations stands at odds with the attributes of spirituality: unrestrained openness (i.e. inclusion of every approach, which will have to be compromised if epistemological stagnation and backward-looking repeatability step in) and ultimate indefiniteness (which clearly clashes with any attempt to apply highly inflexible and precise framework). It is not to say that spirituality - as understood here - will never exist in any organization. In some cases it could be possible, supposedly the more the lesser market pressure is applied. However, as a new organizational paradigm, spirituality seems to be a disputable project.

* The empirical material used in his article has been collected during my (ongoing) qualitative research, conducted between August 2007 and November 2008, consisting in inquiries regarding Polish enterprises which include spiritual issues and techniques in their operations. Up to the present moment 29 in-depth interviews with present and former bosses or employees as well as spiritual trainers working for companies have been conducted, recorded and transcribed. This material has been supplemented by numerous field notes made by the researcher and in some cases by analysis of written or video material related to spiritual aspects of the functioning of these organizations.

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