



Christian thought for Business Executives

Why do we use Hinduism, Buddhism, & New Age Spirituality as a source for Insight?

Harvard University social psychology professor Ellen Langer advises ‘mindfulness for executives’, suggesting it will help organizations make better decisions. “Yoga and Other Leadership Practices for Uncertain Times” comes to us courtesy of the Harvard Business Review, by H. James Wilson and Elaine Eisenman¹. They characterized the participants in a company yoga session as reducing stress associated with uncertainty: “evidence abounds of executives’ developing personal coping strategies to deal with increased uncertainty”. There are many examples of mindfulness, yoga, and new age spirituality in today’s business literature.

In her article, “Spirituality and Ethics in Business”, Corinne McLaughlin quotes work by Ian Mitroff: “In researching companies for his book, ‘A Spiritual Audit of Corporate America’, business professor Ian Mitroff found that “Spirituality could be the ultimate competitive advantage.”² But not all spirituality is equal.

Mindfulness comes from a Buddhistic heritage, according to the source of all wisdom: Wikipedia³. “The term “mindfulness” is a translation of the *Pali* term *sati*, which is a significant element of Buddhist traditions”. The practice of Yoga is described as any corporeal, psychological, and mystical practice which finds its roots in ancient India mainly a product of Hinduism. Finally, New Age Spirituality is a belief based on subjective inner experiences of one’s ‘self’ including the unconscious and the idea of returning to an attitude and way of life more akin to what the individual thinks Man was made for.

Are these the most appropriate sources for the grounding and inspiration of our executives in a post-financial crisis world? In many ways, they seem to resonate with what we think we need, but is this the best we can do?

Who could be against relaxation, focus, and controlled breathing to level out the cortisol gushing through your veins and destroying your body and mind? Well, no one, unless you are treating it or replacing it with behaviors that will leave you more in need than when you began. I feel a significant issue is that things like mindfulness and yoga are taken out of their proper context and their pedigree is ignored before they are incorporated into the leadership “toolbox”. These techniques sound good, but their parentage says a lot about what the real point of these practices is.

In Hinduism and Buddhism, you pay. Pay what? Pay with this life and the next and the next until you reach *nirvana*: a “blowing out” – like a candle – or “quenching” of desire. Desiring nothing. In

¹ Harvard Business Review. 2017. Yoga and Other Leadership Practices for Uncertain Times.

² The Center for Visionary Leadership. 2017. Spirituality in Business.

³ Mindfulness - Wikipedia. 2017. Mindfulness - Wikipedia.

the Hindu context the goals are: *kama*, *artha*, *dharma* and *moksha*. The first, *kama*, being physical pleasure and the last, *moksha*: spiritual release and liberation as well as an end to the cycles of birth and death. Both involve untold millennia of sacrifice to attain, what one author suggested, “not a drop of water, not a drop of water in the ocean, but not a drop in the ocean,” or Jalaluddin Rumi, a Sufi⁴ mystic: “You are not a drop in the ocean. You are the entire ocean in a drop.” Right.

Are these the sorts of pursuits and mindsets that business wants or needs? Are these legitimate pursuits for the capitalistic system that has pulled more out of poverty, increased worldwide health, brought unheard of equality? Does this system that shamed the socialist, communist, and Marxist ideologies really need such a mystic mindset?

“Not so fast!”, you might say, “Hinduism and Buddhism are both religions and I’m against ‘religion’! So, what about ‘spirituality’?” This is another discipline that brings focus to and resides in one’s inner mind. It dispenses, usually, with gods or ghosts and focuses on the “spirit within”, “your own divinity”, the “best you”, and so forth. But, if there is anything that is conspicuously ineffective it is spirituality: the art of spinning around your personal axis of superiority.

I will now lump all of these together and label them as ‘the search for purpose and meaning within yourself’. I believe that nothing has failed more fundamentally than billions and billions of ‘selves’ here on Earth trying to make things better and ‘find’ themselves by “growing”, seeing “nirvana”, or “spiritual release”. Coincidentally, Peter Senge – of Learning Organization fame – has a Systems Thinking⁵ viewpoint on this called: Limits to Growth.

‘Limits to Growth’ is characterized by something that is typical of people: growth. “All growth occurs”, as Niels Bohr is reported to have said, “while being inhibited”. In other words, you have to have something to grow *against*. A seed does not sprout and reach for the sun if there is no gravity to resist it, no soil to push through, and no unattainable Sun to reach up toward.

Whilst being ‘inhibited’ sometimes the ‘limit to growth’ becomes insurmountable. A human can only grow to a certain size before becoming immobile; holding one’s breath underwater is great fun – for about 15 to 30 seconds and then you quickly grow to discover a limit; economic growth is limited by the systems inputs, and I suggest that a limiting input for business executives are the mindsets we are trying to foster using “the search for purpose and meaning in yourself”.

To fashion a scaffold of a belief and faith around business would just be building a new religion. So, let me simplify my thoughts down to one premise and three suggestions in order to present my thought on a coherent and aligned body of leadership practice.

So, the premise is this: *Nothing but the tenets of Christianity has any hope of bringing business executives the resonance of thought, the coherence of form, and the attitude of leadership needed to make business a force for social and personal good.*

Now, let me unpack that.

⁴ Offshoot of Islam influenced by orientalist influences, say some scholars, & traditionally an internalization of the heart of Allah.

⁵ P. Senge, et.al. 1994. The Fifth Discipline Fieldbook. Currency, Doubleday.

What is **Resonance of Thought**? It is the a mainly ethical dimension of my proposal and is based on the Love of God and the Love of Neighbor *over* oneself. The emphasis here is to fundamentally move away from the self-help discovery of ‘who you are’ and ‘what you want to do with your life’, and move on to what God wants you to do and to get down to doing it.

Loving God means to – as it were – stand on His commandments and keep your gaze focused on Him in order to do His will each day. Where to find this “will”? There is one best source for this hiding in plain sight: the Bible. God’s already given his will and his advice to you! The other source is prayer: what is God moving you toward? Move that way, and if you wonder whether or not it is the correct way, check it with the Bible – if the two conflict, then you haven’t been listening correctly. When the two resonate with each other, you are off to the races! Indeed, Paul characterizes the life journey of Christians as a race that needs to be run well, ideally with a prize won when you touch the tape.

Loving your neighbor demands a more finicky explanation. “Who is my neighbor, exactly?”, is probably the most over-asked question in all Christendom. Think of it this way, imaging the distortion of a magnetic field on its surroundings; now imagine that every human on the planet is an iron filing. As you move through life, that field of distortion, that area of influence, moves around you – those are your “neighbors”. Sometimes your attention is drawn to, say, a crisis in a far-away place: those, too, are your neighbors because your neighbors are not just in a field of influence in the physical, horseshoe magnet, sense, but they are where your attention – indeed, your *spirit* – is.

What does this mean for business? It gives a credence to concepts such as Servant Leadership that Servant Leadership doesn’t have without the full moral authority of God behind it. It informs your ethical decision making, removes reliance on policies and procedures, and focuses on “doing unto others as you would have them do unto you” a phrase first uttered in the positive sense by Christ⁶.

What is **Coherence of Form**? One thing lacking in all the other forms referenced in this article is the link with any sort of criteria by which to judge. For example, why does one try and seek out one’s divinity? Does a person have ‘divinity’ at all? From a spirituality perspective, it’s anyone’s guess – or rather, anyone’s opinion. Not so with the Christian approach; with that you have clear and robust measurements.

The Christian approach to, say, life is that it is sacred, so sacred, in fact, that God Himself in the person of Christ came and suffered death for all humanity – not to mention all other manner of physical and emotional suffering. Conversely, just because something is ‘alive’ is not an excuse to release it from consequences. The consequence of sin is physical Death. The consequences for the sin of burning your children alive in public sacrifices, as the Canaanites did, is to incur Jehovah’s wrath. The consequence for covering the sins of the World meant death for Christ.

Christianity gives a comprehensive and objective reference point for most of the social and human rights we aspire to today. Here in Europe, we are still Christians in our laws; Christians, that is, in all

⁶ Luke 6:31 – previous to Christ the Golden Rule was put in the negative: "Avoid doing what you would blame others for doing." – Thales and "Hurt not others in ways that you yourself would find hurtful. Buddha — Udanavarga 5:18" are examples.

but a belief in God. That leaves a niggly detail as to the objective reference point of believing that, say, women and men are equal or that individual human life is precious and that it is worthy of protection, not just from others, but from the State. These are not “obvious” good things in every culture. They are not evident in any other religion but Christianity and feature only in countries that have felt its touch.

What is **Attitude of Leadership**? The Christian attitude of leadership is by example and the example is Christ. The apostle Paul put himself up as an example as well, the point being that this is an integral part of Christian leadership. Plenty of research today into leadership shows that humble leaders who model the way and understand the detail of the business make the best leaders⁷.

Mercy and Grace toward your fellow Man – your neighbor – is also fundamental to the Christian business leader. Mercy, i.e. you don’t get the penalty you deserve and Grace, i.e. you get the reward you haven’t merited, feature prominently in Christian thought and in Christ’s attitude toward Creation. “But that goes contrary to the meritocracy of capitalism!”, you might interject. While capitalism is an underlying tenet of business in the West today, you would have to have avoided organizations altogether to think that they suffer from an abundance of meritocracy. Grace and Mercy are foundational ways of expressing Servant Leadership or Stewardship and do not mean there are no consequences to behavior, but do reflect the basic and fundamental viewpoint that people are valuable and worthy of respect *just because they are people* and created in the likeness and image of the Creator.

Finally, the ‘good and faithful servant’ of Matthew 25:23 was “good” and “faithful” because he had done what he could with what he had. He showed himself trustworthy and shown his master he could be trusted with even more. The Christian business leader, in the words of Paul, is obliged to see life as “running the race”, not to become worthy, but to show you have done what you could with what you have been given. Not only the business leader is running, but those around him are, too. He or she competes as an example, as coach, and as fellow runner.

Far from delivering “ultimate competitive advantage” as Ian Mitroff suggests in the beginning of this article, the sources that business literature are reaching into today are inadequate and inconsistent with the needs of business executives. Indeed, most who practice are utterly unaware of the systems they come from or the main goals of those systems. They are divorced from a coherence and objectivity that Christianity provides. It would do us well to think of God’s will first, others’ welfare second, and leave the tsunami of “self-help” introspection that pervades our culture on the bookshelf – where it belongs.

Dr. Peter Gillies is a freelance organizational development consultant and owner of GMD. He employs psychological, neuroscience, and behavioral economics concepts to understand and enhance personal & organizational effectiveness.



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⁷ Lencioni, P., 2016. *The Ideal Team Player*. John Wiley & Sons. as well as Panning, A., 2002, *A Portrait of Peter: Training, Leadership, and Humble Service*, and especially: Collins, J., 2001. *Good to Great*. HarperCollins