

**BOOK REVIEW**

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***Spirituality, Corporate Culture, and American Business: The Neoliberal Ethic and the Spirit of Global Capital. James Dennis LoRusso. London and New York: Bloomsbury, 2017. P.p. 216. ISBN 9781350006270.***

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I easily engaged with this author in exploring stories and writings he selected to highlight and/or reveal subtle and not-so-subtle attitudes, beliefs, and paradigms driving the 'spirituality and work' phenomenon in the United States. A central theme in this book is discovering "that the increasing business interest in spirituality is a reflection of its global dominance"—boldly articulated in Judi Neal's welcoming comments at an *International Faith and Spirit at Work* Conference in 2011. "Business," she concluded "is the way we can transform consciousness precisely because it is so powerful today." Her comment reveals an underlying belief that business, not government or religion, is the institution best positioned to create a positive future for the world.

Another central theme is how business appeals "to the cultural authority of religion in order to effectively reinforce the established power relations of the organization." Business uses religion and spirituality to serve its own ends. Aptly referencing and critiquing scholars of "workplace spirituality" over decades, James LoRusso documents ways in which 'spirituality' has been entangled with corporate culture and American business, and in the process, has become "deeply implicated in the neoliberalization of the global political and economic systems". He contends that while this entanglement may be seen as part of a movement for moral reform in business or a liberal political orientation, it also can be considered "another example of capitalist exploitation" that serves the political strategies of neoliberalism and global capitalism. Indeed, key players in business utilize religious and spiritual resources as "available forms of cultural capital" to uphold and/or change the *status quo*—depending on what serves their business aims.

In Part One, LoRusso very capably describes and analyzes broad shifts in how management and the public discussed work during the second half of the

twentieth century by looking at post-war (WWII) anxieties about collectivism and alienation, the social and political turmoil of the 1960s and early '70s, and the ultimate emergence of management research focused on "workplace spirituality". He tracks the development of perspectives that saw business providing the ethical norm needed to serve investors and stakeholders and saw management philosophies elevating business perspectives to the status of cultural authorities deemed most capable of shaping society and setting the terms for public discourse, including attitudes toward work.

These developments paralleled business claims that government was responsible for youth hostility of the 1960s and for providing welfare functions that served to undermine the Protestant work ethic, in which work was perceived as a fundamental expression of human nature. He notes that blaming government for the social unrest also served to deflect criticism that may have been directed appropriately toward capitalism and businesses themselves.

LoRusso also explores the development of new leadership models. One of them, Servant Leadership, considered management a moral philosophy that recognized individuals as spiritual beings, some of whom had broader visions, and that "unlike the typical worker, the manager could recognize the spiritual nature of work, the higher purpose it served." Management not only was "a sacred practice" given only to special people with insight and "a sense of the unknowable", but also, it was the key to linking the individual's need to work to organizational goals. What most of these leadership models shared was a belief that effective leadership was very personal, emerged from within, and helped employees *cope with*, not challenge or change, workplace injustices and systemic problems. From this perspective, injustice stemmed not from the system, but from its misuse. Good managers, not system changes, were needed. Though management discourse echoed anti-establishment concerns of the New Left, it clearly insisted that individuals could transform society only *through* business institutions, not in spite of them.

In Part Two, the author examines how this spirituality and business entanglement supported the private and professional lives of several successful businesspeople in the late 20<sup>th</sup> century. In doing so, he also addresses how the post-industrial business needs of the high-tech arena led to a more decentralized, team-oriented work environment, in which individuals had greater autonomy and responsibility for company goals. That, in turn, led to focusing on personal change, rather than social change or structural reform, when coping with stress or chaos created by market forces. Even scholar Judi Neal, who promotes a paradigm shift from a materialist age to one grounded in "spirit" and calls for "corporate shamans" to bring wisdom to the business elites, speaks only in individual, not collective terms – revealing a limited understanding of a shaman's communal role.

Following the evolution of 'Conscious Capitalism', LoRusso says that it developed into "an organized movement of like-minded business elites who promote the idea that ethically attuned business owners are best equipped to address the depraved temporal and spiritual state of the world." This

reinforced an existing belief that business, rather than the State, is the domain of society best equipped to lead humanity into the trans-industrial age.

Part Three looks at two localized contacts of entanglement between work and spirituality. LoRusso shows that though the “language of spirituality serves a number of purposes”, it consistently “reasserts the authority of business elites, managers, and capital.” His conclusion reiterates his focus and identifies further aspects to be explored.

Adequately addressing all the issues in this important book is not possible in a short review. However, this is a fascinating study well-grounded in theory and supported by clear examples. Having lived in the US through the decades LoRusso describes, learned many of the management and leadership theories he presents, worked intensively with these issues in a corporate setting, and spent a lifetime involved with religion and spirituality, including shamanism, I found this most revealing. Especially with the current US political climate, this book sheds light and understanding on the complexity of how we’ve arrived at this moment in history. Only by understanding root causes and historical context can we adequately address the issues. This fine book has inspired me to further explore the many connections I’ve made, but don’t have space to address here.