WHO DOES “SPIRITUAL” MODIFY?

A Review of Ian I. Mitroff and Elizabeth Denton’s A Spiritual Audit of Corporate America

KENNETH MISCHEL

Barbara’s performance at work was not up to snuff. What was to be done? A biblical response awaited the next morning, so Ian I. Mitroff and Elizabeth Denton inform us in A Spiritual Audit of Corporate America (Jossey-Bass, 1999), quoting a passage from William H. Nix’s Transforming Your Workplace for Christ. Barbara was not fired. Rather, her manager, taking Paul’s teachings as a model, warned, and sympathized with her. Working in a new part of the company today, Barbara is excelling.

The ghost of Jacob Marley is sent to hover over Ebenezer Scrooge. His mission is to warn a former partner and friend that the main business of business is more than business. The mission of A Spiritual Audit of Corporate America is quite similar. The difference is only in the nature of the fictional person being warned—and instead of being authored by Dickens, the subject of the current warning is authored through the incorporation statutes of a state or nation.

What afflicts Corporate America, like what afflicts the alcoholic, Mitroff and Denton believe, is a condition of spiritual impoverishment. Alcoholism was generally resistant to the treatment of psychologists, as the authors report in the name of Jung, because these experts, by refusing to see spirituality as a dimension of personal

Kenneth Mischel is an Associate Professor of Economics and Finance in the Zicklin School of Business, Baruch College, CUNY. His recent publications have appeared in Atlantic Economic Journal, Global Focus, Journal of Income Distribution, Philosophical Forum, and Review of Social Economy. He is currently writing a book on the nature of corporate personality and the possibilities of economic governance.

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being, blinded themselves to the source of the problem. By the same token, organizational scientists are not currently much help in healing what ails because the problem itself is invisible to them.

The early parts of the book are aimed at documenting that a problem in fact does exist. Mitroff and Denton sent out numerous written questionnaires to human resource departments of corporations and nonprofit organizations across the country. One hundred and thirty-one were completed and returned. In addition, they conducted seventy interviews. Among those interviewed were managers and executives of an East Coast manufacturing firm and a West Coast utility. Building a working conception of spirituality from responses, the authors document a consistent finding: people want to express spirituality in the workplace, believe it is critical to do so for the health and longevity of their organizations, but find themselves largely unable to do so.

The affliction having been documented, Mitroff and Denton next turn toward avenues for healing. This they do by offering five models for spirituality in the workplace. In a chapter entitled “Taking Over Your Company for Christ,” the authors explore ways in which the corporation can come to be viewed as an essentially religious endeavor and explore the concept of a stakeholder in this light. One might also seek spiritual sustenance in the wisdom of the blind watchmaker. In another chapter, Mitroff and Denton discuss ways in which the self-conception of one’s organization and purpose for being might also be evolutionarily transformed, as was the case with Tom’s of Maine or the YMCA. Want something more directly clinical? The spiritually impoverished corporation can perhaps be healed through the same means as can the spiritually impoverished alcoholic: fellowship, a better understanding of one’s limits, and a richer recognition of a higher power, who you are free to relate to as you see fit.

Make ice cream? Why not manufacture rain forest crunch, like Ben & Jerry’s? That way a social mission is literally built into the manufacturing process. In a chapter on the socially responsible corporation as a model for fostering corporate spirituality, Mitroff and Denton shrewdly point out an important tension. Is profit for a socially responsible corporation a means or an end? Out of what is made the marrow of such a fictional person’s bones? As much soul searching as Ben & Jerry’s may have done, Mitroff and Denton suggest it has not come to terms with this question.
Fifth, the authors consider the values-based corporation, using Kingston Technology as an exemplar. What they have in mind here, it seems to this reviewer, is a secular mirror image of the religious corporation, where universal values are substituted for religious, particularistic ones. This substantially broadens the corporate stakeholder base. In what they call a “best practice model,” Mitroff and Denton weave strands of the first four models to the fifth. The reason for the privileging of the values-based corporation model is that carrying out a plan built upon it is likely to be the least disruptive to the status quo. When a person starts learning to high-jump, he or she had better start low.

Arnold Schoenberg once wrote about his teaching method that the highest aim he could aspire to, far higher than getting his students to know, was getting his students to search. A major benefit of reading A Spiritual Audit of Corporate America is the set of questions it leads its reader to ask. The chapter on the evolutionary organization is entitled “Called to Spirituality.” Fine, but who has been called, Tom’s of Maine or Tom’s CEO, whose own journey led him to take an extended leave of absence to attend the Harvard Divinity School? If you want to say that the answer is both, then what is the nature of the relationship between the two callings?

Consider the imagery upon which the book is built. The corporation is pictured as similar in predicament to an alcoholic. It is the corporation itself that is spiritually impoverished. But the book’s audit provides empirical evidence attesting to the spiritual impoverishment at work of those who staff and manage these corporations. The tension weaves its way through the tapestry of working models. Some of them seem primarily focused on healing the spiritual impoverishment of the corporation (the religious organization model particularly comes to mind) and others focus more on healing the spiritual impoverishment of corporate employees (the evolutionary organization perhaps). Wherein does the locus of corporate personhood reside, in the fiction created, in the administrators of that fiction, or in the individuals who together authored the fiction in the first place? It is a question that any thoughtful resident of seventeenth-century England would have easily recognized.

Executive A wants to take the company over for Christ. B wants an evolutionary organization, C a socially responsible enterprise. How is this conflict, dare we say a war of all against all, settled? Perhaps A and B will enter a reciprocal agreement. But such an
agreement may not continue to stand. For hanging in the air is the possibility that C might offer B just a bit more than A has. As institutional economists have shown us, in a world of transactions costs broadly conceived, self-interested reciprocity may not be enough. What to do? What Hobbes suggested 350 years ago: the joint authorship of a fictional man and an act of mutual covenant in which each relinquishes his right of self-governance (within limits) to the man or sovereign assembly personifying this fictional man. When the good, the purpose of jointly escaping the state of nature, is self-defense, the corporate man is called the Leviathan, or, State. When the good is a good or service, the purpose of escaping the state of nature being to escape transactions costs occurring during production in teams, the corporate man is called the Firm.2 When the good is The Good itself, what then is the corporate man to be called?

The problem is that Hobbes, though remarkably insightful in recognizing that fiction plays a profound role in both political and personal being, was far less insightful about the possibilities of that role. We are not much more insightful than Hobbes.

A voice reverberates in the monastery; psalms are being recited out loud and in unison. “There is a curious non-psychological quality to the voice,” Patricia Hampl tells us. “This is the voice of the intense anonymous self. It has no mother, no father. Or it borrows, finally, the human family as its one true relation. This is the memory of the world’s longing.”3 Can the family of corporations be borrowed similarly?

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