Finding Meaning in Business

When Patricia Aburdene issued her latest book in the Mega-trends franchise, she and her sometime partner, John Naisbitt, had been offering their prophecies on American business culture for almost twenty years. The newest edition was unique, however, because it blurred the line between religion and commerce in a way unexpected for a business best seller. Megatrends 2010 promised to reveal “the rise of conscious capitalism” as the new revolution in corporate operations, consumer behavior, investing, business leadership, and work itself. Filled with interviews, anecdotes, and predictions in bold face, Megatrends 2010 concluded that capitalism was being transformed from an egoistic survival of the fittest built around greed to a new vision of commerce grounded in compassion and enlightened self-interest that is, at its heart, a spiritual phenomenon. No longer would God and mammon be separate, and the path to enlightenment would no more require the renunciation of worldly possessions. Instead, they were coming together in new and creative ways. The “power of spirituality,” Aburdene asserted, was making an impact and demanded notice as the next big trend in American business.

What Aburdene predicted is today not hard to see. At the food giant Tyson Foods, workplace chaplains roam the corporate halls and processing floors. Corporations like Ford and Xerox sponsor spiritual retreats to spark creativity, and small businesses include Bible verses and Christian symbols on their advertising. In the fast-food industry, Chick-fil-A honors the Sabbath by closing on Sunday, and amid rapid growth they dedicate each new store to God’s glory. Prominent business theorists like The One-Minute Manager’s Kenneth Blanchard write books about Jesus as a leader, and even Wal-Mart sells the publications. At the same time, major American universities including Virginia Tech, Notre Dame, and Columbia University offer courses touting the value of spirituality to future business managers, and in Washington, DC, public policy makers wonder how to respond to a rising tide of religious discrimination complaints.
Not to be left out, churches and many new religious organizations support workplace spirituality. Domino’s Pizza founder Tom Monaghan established Legatus as an organization exclusively for Roman Catholic CEOs and other high-level business executives. Evangelical Christians have a similar organization in Fellowship of Companies for Christ, and now Muslim CEOs can connect through the Minaret Business Association. For major league and minor league baseball players, including Cy Young Award–winner Jake Peavy, Baseball Chapel connects sports and faith through team Bible studies and worship. For PBS correspondent Judith Valente, the Coalition for Ministry in Daily Life is a faith-at-work-resource.

For many Americans throughout our recent history, spirituality and business have seemed like exact opposites. The former is concerned with questions of meaning and ultimate significance while the latter is supposedly devoted to making money and to affairs of this world. Aburdene reported there had traditionally been a “firewall” between spirituality and business, but it was a barrier that was breaking down as both individuals and organizations undergo a spiritual awakening. Individuals are seeking to bring their whole selves to the workplace, including their spirituality, and businesses today are dependent upon the creativity that only “consciousness” and spirituality can provide. Thus, capitalism is being transformed from the inside and the outside, changing the way Americans do business.¹

Six years earlier, a BusinessWeek cover and feature story had already heralded spirituality in business as a hot trend, and the magazine offered evidence to prove it. The article reported that Americans desired meaning and fulfillment in their work more than additional pay or time off.² Although surprising on a certain level, this finding revealed not only how many people were beginning to realize that there was potentially more to work than getting a paycheck, but also that the inability to find workplace meaning had the potential to create personal anxiety and even crisis. The search for meaning in work, the connection between work and faith or the divine, and the relationship between work and other areas of life like family and health were being raised more frequently and acted on in new, creative ways individually and organizationally. These same developments were prompting profound moral, philosophical, and religious questions not normally asked or answered in American business.

Beginning in the 1990s, different forms of spirituality in work seemed to pop up all the time. An explosion of books on the subject could be
found in both religious bookstores and mainstream retailers with titles such as *The Business Bible*, *Your Soul at Work*, *The Soul of a Business*, *Angels in the Workplace*, *Soul at Work*, *Jesus, CEO*, and *Leading with Soul*. Individuals sought out like-minded co-workers for lunchtime discussion groups and Bible studies, and a variety of organizations began to emerge that hosted meetings and conferences to connect work and spirituality. Employers, especially when faced with labor shortages for highly skilled workers, adopted programs and accommodations that created holistic and family-friendly work environments, all of which were more open and accommodating to the spiritual and emotional needs of employees. Corporations and the individuals who work in them recognized that child care concerns, depression, or even poor fitness could impede optimal work performance, and so programs and services to meet those needs were created and used. Why not spirituality too? Professional training also adopted this concern for holism and forms of spirituality, and employees appreciated the accommodation and vision of these workplaces while the companies themselves hoped that short-term costs would eventually result in greater economic success. In 1990 John Naisbitt and Patricia Aburdene had noted in *Megatrends 2000* that companies were spending $4 billion for spiritual consultants and “consciousness raising,” and they were correct when they predicted that this trend would only continue to grow.

Something was indeed happening. Many of the developments in workplace spirituality related easily to the traditional theological identities of Christians or the practices of diverse religious traditions, but others expressed forms of spirituality outside the boundaries of established faiths. Some of the changes could easily be understood as new forms of professional development or programs to increase morale and productivity; other activities, programs, and services appeared unrelated to the affairs of commerce. Still others seemed to tap into Americans’ incredible love for “self-help” methodologies and, perhaps most of all, their love of success. Whatever it was, the apparent novelty made spirituality big news and a worthy subject for trend-watchers like Aburdene. But while there are always new things, very few developments, if any, come into existence ex nihilo. This was the case for workplace spirituality as well. In fact, the efforts to find meaning in work extend at least as far back as the founding of America and were a recurring theme in much of the modern Western tradition, and within that tradition, the Christian notion of calling was central.
The Idea of Vocation

When the Puritan divine Richard Steele wrote his treatise *The Religious Tradesman* in 1684, he too was claiming a connection between business and spirituality. Steele praised business as worthy work for a Christian, and he hoped that parents would “be persuaded to educate their children for a life of business and usefulness.” Offering careful advice for discerning whether business was one’s appropriate vocation, Steele suggested self-examination as to vocational fit, consultation with experienced businessmen, and prayer to God for direction and assistance. For the remainder of his book Steele described in detail the virtues that were necessary for a Christian in business, including prudence, justice, truth, and contentment. Steele did not worry about business as a potential challenge to faith as much as he feared sloth—a sin that an industrious businessman was sure to avoid. The great English hymnist and fellow minister Isaac Watts found the volume so inspirational that he wrote an introduction to a new printing in 1747. For Steele and his admirers, the justification for Christians in commerce was biblically derived from fusing the economic division of labor with the gifted diversity of the Body of Christ, thus making some Christians literally called to business.

It was from his study of Puritans specifically and Calvinists more generally that the great sociologist Max Weber developed his famous “Protestant ethic” thesis on the origins of capitalism and modern business practices. In looking at the development of business life and capitalist systems at the end of the nineteenth century, Weber was struck by how overwhelmingy Protestant everything was. Why, he asked, were business owners and capitalists more often Protestant, and why were Calvinists even more prevalent? In particular he was struck by the Puritans and their rigorous piety in all areas of life, coupled with the successful commerce they developed in New England. He concluded that these religious traditions and the forms of economic organization known as capitalism had an affinity for one another.

In *The Protestant Ethic*, Weber also offered a definition of capitalism that still deserves attention. He argued that capitalism is not about the maximization of wealth or even its pursuit. Long before the rise of capitalism, humans sought money and riches, but greed has “nothing to do with capitalism.” Rather, Weber argued, capitalism is an economic system with inherent values, including self-discipline and rationality, that result not in profit but “forever renewed profit.” Unfortunately, popular opinion
has not changed a great deal from Weber’s time until now. From Gordon Gecko in the film *Wall Street* touting that “greed is good” to the perception that business is all about making a lot of money, business is associated with many values, but few are seen as good ones.

Despite his being misinterpreted frequently, Weber asserted that the relationship between economics and religion was directly connected to the values and behaviors that each fostered and demanded, and perhaps most important, the connection was never one way. Whereas Adam Smith saw economics as shaped by religion and morality, and Karl Marx asserted that economics determined religion, Weber argued for a more complex relationship with each influencing the development of the other. Religion, he said, has the power to shape economic life, and economic realities can make certain religious groups and certain religious ideas more or less available. For his “Protestant ethic” thesis, Weber asserted that on the economic side, capitalism demanded hard work and asceticism; on the faith side, Calvinism’s teaching on predestination produced anxiety and a need to prove eternal salvation in this world while, at the same time, proclaiming that everyone was assigned a vocation—places and roles to which one was called to serve God. This form of faith and this pattern of economics were then attracted by their “elective affinity.”

The idea of vocation had deep roots in the Hebraic and Christian traditions, from the biblical text to the Protestant reformers, roots of which both Steele and Weber were well aware. The Hebrew and Christian scriptures frequently speak of human work, its meaning, and its difficulty. In the Genesis stories of creation, humanity is called into being as workers. God gives to humans “dominion” over the newly created earth, and in Eden, the man is placed in the garden “to till it and to keep it.” Yet another part of Genesis speaks of the difficulty found in work. The sin of Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden is mythically connected to the deem meaning of work in that human labor is cursed as a consequence of disobedience. God’s words to Adam foretell the trouble ahead, “Cursed is the ground because of you; in toil you shall eat of it all the days of your life; thorns and thistles it shall bring forth for you; and you shall eat the plants of the field. By the sweat of your face you shall eat bread until you return to the ground.” Adam and Eve are expelled from the rich productivity of the garden and forced to work in alienation from God’s presence.

The New Testament has similar tensions in consideration of work. Jesus often calls individuals away from their daily work to a life of discipleship free from mammon and affairs of the world, but at the same time
he repeatedly tells stories about daily work and what work will be like in the Kingdom of God. Jesus teaches about faithful managers, dishonest and lazy workers, and ungrateful laborers. He states that as his Father in heaven is working, so he as the Son of God must also be working, and certainly humans can be no different. The call of Jesus to discipleship is a call to be part of a community that will work to make disciples of all nations.\textsuperscript{12} This need not involve grand schemes or so-called important work. Even the most minor task is claimed by Jesus and made part of God’s work: Jesus teaches that even fetching a cup of cold water can have spiritual meaning.\textsuperscript{13}

However, it was in the writings of St. Paul that the Protestant reformers found their greatest inspiration. It was Paul and his \textit{Epistle to the Galatians} that in 1517 prompted the German Protestant reformer Martin Luther to question the monastic life to which he had sworn himself. He began to ask whether the spiritual works of monasticism were better than the good works of the common layman, and he wondered whether good works mattered at all in one’s relationship with God. His conclusion was that all Christians are “called” and not just a spiritual elite group of bishops, priests, monks, and nuns. In fact, Luther said that the supposed good works of monks and nuns were far surpassed by the simple work of a common maid. For Luther, you know you are serving God when you serve others, and any work that does not serve is demonic and to be avoided. A “calling” or a vocation was for all Christians, and so the Christian life should be seen as living out one’s calling in the everyday world of work, family, community, and church.

Working in Geneva several years later, John Calvin adopted Luther’s larger project on vocation with a few alterations. A vocation, for Calvin, was a “station” or “sentry post,” which God gives to Christians to prevent them from wandering. Monasticism is unsuitable as a Christian vocation because it is not a defined area of responsibility where spirituality daily engages materiality, nor does it provide service.\textsuperscript{14} The vow taken by monks is false, said Calvin, because it is likely in conflict with one’s true calling to marriage, family, occupation, and social participation.\textsuperscript{15} In his great work, \textit{The Institutes}, Calvin considered a main problem of the Christian life to be human mobility and restlessness that would lead Christians to abandon God-given work because of the hardships associated with it. His fear was not that Christians would hold too fast to the status quo, but rather they would be too likely to roam, looking for a nonexistent occupation without hardship.\textsuperscript{16} In his commentary on 1 Corinthians 7:20,
Calvin allowed for occupational change only if a sufficient reason is available, and he interprets Paul in this passage as condemning the eagerness by which many switch jobs for little or no reason. Change is possible but must be made with prayerful consideration of motive, merit, and the will of God. This reinforced the conviction that the meaning of work was not to be found in personal satisfaction but rather in service to others.

The Puritans in Britain and the American colonies received this rich tradition and added to it as well. Less than fifty years after Calvin's death, William Perkins put forth a theology of vocation that distinguished the "general call" from the "particular call." The general call referred to faithfulness in Jesus Christ and as such was the same for all Christians, but the particular call directed individual Christian to their specific roles, occupations, and stations in life. Because all Christians have a particular calling, Perkins wanted to ensure that all understood the divine rules that governed them. Faith and work were to be joined; a person was to be confident and steady in a calling; and since all are called to work, begging should be outlawed. Another Puritan pastor and theologian, Cotton Mather, later added that the two types of call were like the oars on a rowboat, and each must be pulled equally.

The theological clarifications of Mather and the Puritans of the early 1700s defined subtle but important changes to the idea of vocation established by Luther and Calvin. Mather's rowboat metaphor included in it that the boat was the Christian's transportation to heaven, meaning that faith and holiness were to be combined with diligent work in one's particular calling to merit salvation. Whereas Luther asserted that one could serve God only by serving one's neighbor, the later Puritans claimed that a vocation served God, society, and oneself. The individual was aided because one's vocation was a path to salvation. Richard Baxter, the Puritan writer most influential on Weber and his study of the Protestant ethic, claimed that in one's calling the worker could obtain proof of salvation. With its focus on eternal rewards, this change in vocation made the particular call a place where great spiritual meaning might be found. It tied the materiality of work to the divine. And soon, Puritans would claim that the connection also went the other way. Richard Steele declared in The Tradesman's Calling that God would bless hard work and diligence in one's vocation with prosperity, making work a path to both salvation and riches. These developments grounded Weber's thesis that faith was aided by capitalism as a way to "prove" one's salvation, and capitalism was aided by faith as a motivation toward hard work and asceticism.
As it emerged in late Puritan theology, the theology of vocation did not closely resemble the teachings of the Protestant reformers and was considerably more complex. But it was also more American. A vocation was not about service to neighbor alone; it served the eternal, spiritual ends of the one who was called, and it offered something in this life as well. This threefold character of vocation is what continued and continues today, albeit with somewhat different language. Contemporary discussions of workplace spirituality all claim that one can serve others, be truly and deeply spiritual, and derive wealth all at the same time. If it has one, this is the thesis of Aburdene's *Megatrends 2010*. Working in business can be a path to spiritual growth, a means to creating a better world, and a path to prosperity. In fact, she contends, harnessing these truths in today's new economic paradigm will result in greater prosperity yet.

*Not a Puritan New England Economy*

Just as theologies developed and transformed, so did economies, and the institutional structures of commerce have evolved substantially since the days of colonial America. While early forms of corporate organization were present in Puritan New England and as far back as the Middle Ages, the modern business corporation emerged full steam in the nineteenth century. Legal changes made it possible, but the Industrial Revolution was the key factor in this development, making corporations more prominent in their numbers and especially in their size. In the United States, a national economy—as opposed to several regional ones—and large corporations of truly national scope challenged the face-to-face, human interaction that had so often governed economic life and replaced it with rational, bureaucratic structures of management. Work was organized differently, and efficiency as a value gained the highest prominence in commerce, substituting for the relational and religious values that had guided the Puritans and others who practiced business in the early years of the American republic. As the era of "big business" emerged, sometimes tempered by governmental regulations, the American economy came to dominate the globe. By the mid-twentieth century, business and national interest were conflated, leading the president of General Motors to make the famous assertion that "what's good for the country is good for General Motors, and vice versa." Amid the boom, there was great work stability in large organizations, and sociologists and social critics commented
on these developments in such books as William Whyte’s *The Organization Man* (1956).

But by the 1980s it was clear that the great industrial economy of the United States was waning. A new economic transformation was underway, yet few if any knew what it was changing into. As with the Industrial Revolution a century earlier, technology was an important factor since it allowed some tasks to be automated and others eliminated as unnecessary. In the 1980s and early 1990s massive layoffs occurred, and “downsizing” became a way of life for corporate employees. This created severe anxiety among workers, including those who remained in the downsized organizations. Experts warned that there was no such thing as lifetime employment. These days, workers now expect to move from job to job; temporary work is common; and there is little sense of company loyalty because companies have proven they have no loyalty to their employees. This “new employee contract” led many workers to feel unappreciated, anxious, and frankly scared about their future.\(^2\) Frequently, those who remained in downsized companies actually felt worse because they were asked to absorb the work of departing co-workers at the same rate of pay, making them feel even more abused.\(^3\) A new crisis of workplace meaning emerged in the midst of job loss and economic change.

At the same time companies were pushing employees to the maximum level, they were also realizing that the postindustrial economy, with new products like software and new “lean and mean” models of corporate organization, relied on the knowledge, creativity, and initiative of employees more than ever. In addition to new products, technology made less hierarchical organizations possible. In this environment, trend-watcher Aburdene concluded that there must be more self-management. Everyone had to be a leader because power had shifted from the organizational system to the individual. Even large corporate cultures were seeking to encourage creative entrepreneurship in order to produce innovative products and to manage more efficiently.\(^4\) Ideally, a new type of worker was highly educated and innovative. This was significant to the rising interest in workplace spirituality because creativity was increasingly understood to be an inherently spiritual process involving the whole person and not just the intellect, manual skill, or brute strength.

Along with Aburdene, a whole host of academics, journalists, and trend-watchers attempted to explain the new economic developments. They were also developing clever names for the new class or classes of
workers that emerged to meet the economy’s new demands. In 1991 Robert Reich coined the term “symbolic analyst” to describe the new worker who creates economic value by manipulating symbols and using tools such as “mathematical algorithms, legal arguments, financial gimmicks, scientific principles, psychological insights about how to persuade or amuse, systems of induction or deduction, or any other set of techniques for doing conceptual puzzles.”²⁵ The symbolic analyst is usually highly educated, often works in teams, and is not dependent upon any one location to do his or her work. Reich, who went on to serve as secretary of labor in the Clinton administration, was careful to emphasize that symbolic analysts as a category of workers did not easily overlap with existing categories like “professional” and “managerial.” For example, he said that all lawyers may be professionals but not all are symbolic analysts because their work may be entirely routine, and “special deftness in solving, identifying, or brokering new problems” is more important than supervision.²⁶

In 1995 Newsweek coined the term “overclass” to describe the new breed of Americans who, it stated, were hard to define “because it is a state of mind and also a slice on the income curve.” While the group was diverse, the one thing Newsweek could say with assurance was that high levels of education were the foundation of the overclass, and their list of “The Overclass 100” included individuals in business, finance, law, government, education, arts, and the media.²⁷ The journalist David Brooks offered his take and definitely the most creative of all descriptors in his book Bobos in Paradise (2000). Brooks’s thesis was that this new class combined both bourgeois and bohemian values for the first time in history, and with a short abbreviation of those two words (bo-urgeoise and bo-hemian), the term “Bobo” was born. Because of their high levels of education, Brooks claimed that Bobos have been very successful in the new economy, but they have “anxiety about abundance.” They worry that their economic success is incompatible with their bohemian values.²⁸ The results, said Brooks, is that Bobos are “countercultural capitalists” who seek new ways to do business, which honors their bohemian values, and he offered examples such as Ben Cohen and Jerry Greenfield of Ben & Jerry’s Ice Cream to make his point. Bobos are more focused on creativity than money, so they view business as an art, and like the Puritans, they also want to understand their work as a vocation or calling. Brooks noted how “the weird thing is that when employees start thinking like artists and activists, they actually work harder for the company.”²⁹ By this fusion, a new form of work ethic was supposedly born.
In another attempt to make sense of the new economy and its workers, in 2002 Richard Florida at Carnegie Mellon University invented the term “creative class” to describe a new group of workers. Florida argued that the creative class included as many as 30 percent of all Americans for whom “every aspect and every manifestation of creativity—technological, cultural, economic—is interlinked and inseparable.”

Like Brooks’s Bo-bos, the creative class Florida described also has a longing for personal fulfillment and self-expression. They desire “a creative life full of intense, high-quality, multidimensional experiences.” To create economic value requires active and authentic experiences of creativity in multiple arenas. Rather than interpreting time at a funky music joint as recreation, the creative class counts it as complimentary. These diverse experiences feed the creative process, and they want to be in those environments that support creativity. Channeling a prototypical member of the class, Florida wrote that it is a “way of both disconnecting and recharging, it is part of what we need to do as creative people.”

What appears to be hedonistic to others outside that class is, in fact, a necessity for the class to exist. The creative class treats experiences as consumables and desires pleasure and happiness in all areas of life, including work. This is not counter to economic productivity, but in a strange reversal of the Protestant work ethic’s emphasis on asceticism, is required for the work of the creative class to be most productive.

In describing the new type of worker, however, the most common term in use has been the “knowledge class.” Drawing upon high levels of education and training, and working in fields as diverse as medicine, marketing, and manufacturing, knowledge workers simply “think for a living.” Of course, most types of work require some level of expertise, but for knowledge workers, thinking is their primary if not exclusive contribution to economic productivity. While some people have done knowledge work for centuries (e.g., monks and professors), their numbers have grown astronomically, and they are more essential in today’s complex global economy than ever before. Scholars estimate that a quarter to a half of all workers in advanced industrial economies like the United States are knowledge workers. This new type of worker also likes certain features to accompany their work, including autonomy, and their effectiveness requires a higher level of commitment than other types of work: Unlike manual labor or many services, you cannot think about other things while you work if you are paid only to think. Likewise, you cannot turn off your brain when you leave the office, and maybe there is no need to do so. The desire for
autonomy coupled with technology often allows those in the knowledge class to work at home or at their own hours, designing their own work processes rather than being dependent upon what has been established for them. Knowledge work has no assembly lines—a process that is metaphorically and literally linear in its design. Knowledge work is more like a spider’s web with multiple points of connection and interface, all in support of a common goal.

The new knowledge class also devotes more of their time to work. Increased demands require it, and the meaning found in creativity, exciting corporate cultures, and new areas of enterprise facilitates it. As Fortune stated in 2000, “Overwork in part seems to be a class thing. While hours for unskilled workers have actually been falling slightly (even taking multiple-job holders into account), they’ve been headed skyward for highly educated professionals, suggesting a semantic flip-flop: The working class now has more leisure, and the leisure class has more work.” In many cases, the workplace becomes the only form of community that workers know, and bonds between co-workers become those of a pseudo-family. One’s closest relationship may be drawn from the workplace, and for single people, it may be the main source one has for meeting a mate. The importance of the workplace as a community also makes the workplace a hospitable environment for spirituality in the same way that it is hospitable to friendship and even love. Sociologist Arlie Hoschild has even argued that work is so comfortable that people often prefer the office to the demands of home.

Regardless of the particular title adopted, whether symbolic analyst or creative class, the centrality of work in people’s lives made attention to the meaning of work all the more important, and an increasing focus on creativity, collaboration, and personal relationships at the office provided openings for spiritual dialogue. These things also channeled the managerial concern for increasing the productivity of knowledge workers. Forty years ago, the great management theorist Peter Drucker predicted that productivity gains for knowledge workers would be the next great managerial challenge. The old, highly rational and hierarchical forms of command and control over work processes would not be effective with the knowledge class. To impose old-fashioned industrial structures would destroy the environment of autonomy, community, and creativity that make knowledge work possible. What was promising instead was an enhancement of what already worked. Creativity, community, autonomy, and holistic concern became new employee benefits that supported the
productivity of the new knowledge class, and a particular type of spirituality found a partner in knowledge work.

**Religious Developments**

More traditional theological forms of vocation remained after the Puritans, but they tended to be hidden from view except for a few Protestant exemplars and periodic efforts by Lutherans, Presbyterians, Episcopalians, and other mainline Protestants to foster a vocational revival. Perhaps the most important of those renewal efforts appeared soon after World War II when the newly formed World Council of Churches (WCC) devoted special attention at its first two assemblies to the significance of the laity in the life of the church. In its early statements and studies, the WCC asserted that all Christians had the power to transform the world through their daily work, and the church must be in concord with the laity so that “the laity in their turn (will) become genuine representatives of the church in areas of modern life to which the church has no access.” This claim seemed strange since it followed one of the world’s greatest encounters with systemic evil, the Nazi state, but reflecting on that challenge, the Protestant leaders of the WCC attended not to systemic reform, such as new models of Christian government or a Christianized economic order, but to individual empowerment, faithful living, and vocation. In Europe, these same commitments gave rise to the Evangelical Academies that offered retreats and other resources for Protestants to consider their life and work as ministry.

Noteworthy developments occurred among Romans Catholics as well. Beginning in the late nineteenth century, Catholic leaders began to take seriously the religious meaning of work in their response to industrialization and as the result of a series of papal encyclicals. Pope Leo XIII’s *Rerum Novarum: The Condition of Labor* (1891) began the process, and it continued to Pope John Paul II’s *Laborem Exercens: On Human Work* (1981) and *Centesimus Annus: On the Hundredth Anniversary of Rerum Novarum* (1991). In his statements, John Paul II affirmed that work is necessary because it both expresses humanity’s creation in the image of God and can serve the common good; he also wrote specifically about a “spirituality of work.” John Paul II’s writings on work, coupled with his efforts to reign in Marxist influences on the church’s theology, led some Roman Catholics to conclude that John Paul II was a capitalist. Michael Novak, a conservative Roman Catholic scholar at the American Enterprise Institute,
wrote *Business as a Calling* (1996) to make these very claims and to affirm that there was a “Catholic ethic” with an affinity to capitalism as much as there was a Protestant one.

But by the 1960s, the WCC and its member churches were changing their social witness away from the idea of vocation and toward the critique of economic, political, and social structures. Business was not to be engaged through vocation but opposed through advocacy and movements of transformation. Some efforts to revive vocation among mainline Protestants continued, but with limited effort and little effect. Lutheran layman William Diehl, an executive at Bethlehem Steel, expressed his discontent over the loss of vocation in a series of books, as did others, but to no avail. Likewise, centuries of a clergy-only meaning for vocation were hard to reverse among Roman Catholics in particular, and “having a vocation” was still widely understood by the faithful as having a call to be a priest, monk, or nun. In 1997 a survey by the sociologist Robert Wuthnow revealed that few mainline Protestant or Catholics saw the link between faith and work in their lives, and many were skeptical about churches seeking to address workplace issues. The effect, Wuthnow reported, was that “those who attend religious services every week are almost as likely as those who attend less often to say that they are dissatisfied with their work and to complain of burnout . . . (and) the two groups are virtually indistinguishable in terms of motives for working hard and doing their work well.” A Protestant ethic—or even a Catholic one—was effectively absent, and despite the rich theological resources, the link between the historic European denominations and modern American commerce was, at best, unclear.

Evangelical Christians, because of their Protestant roots, were also heirs to the tradition of vocation, but as in so many things in American religious life and history, they offered a marked contrast to Catholics and their fellow Protestants. In their formative history, American evangelicals had readily embraced business and market culture as an economic system, means of evangelism, and form of ecclesiastical organization. Fervent anticommunism in the early twentieth century was one important reason. Yet even earlier, the nineteenth-century revivals of Charles Finney had made use of emerging forms of advertising and business organization, and marketplace methods became allied with the evangelical’s personal decision for faith as well as a commitment to individual choice in finding a congregation (sometimes described as “church shopping”). The best contemporary example of these practices has been the megachurch
flagship Willow Creek in suburban Chicago, which was founded based on a marketing study. It continues to use worship styles that speak to their “target demographic.”

Numerous commentators have noted how, for at least the last thirty years, evangelical Christianity has been rising in numbers of adherents and cultural influence. Most recently, the evangelicals’ style of vocation has made a cultural impact, not through the traditional language of the Reformation but via concern for meaning-making and purpose. In early 2005, the Reverend Rick Warren’s *The Purpose Driven Life* (2002) made front-page news—a recovering methamphetamine addict in Georgia read from the book to the man who held her hostage and who had just shot a judge, court reporter, and deputy sheriff. According to media reports, she attempted to show her captor, through passages from the book, that he too had a purpose in life. Warren’s book offered a contemporary compilation of vocational ideas but seldom used the term “calling,” relying instead on a host of potential synonyms such as identity, plan, design, mission, and purpose. Yet it did maintain the more traditional Puritan division of the general and particular call, speaking repeatedly of service to God and neighbor, while also reminding readers that this life is about “preparing for eternity.”

Warren’s *The Purpose Driven Life* has been a huge market success. *Publishers Weekly* reported that it was the best-selling book in 2003 and 2004 with 20.5 million copies sold in those two years. It has also been translated into twenty-eight different languages. The book did what American evangelicals have done well for over two centuries: blend the values of popular culture with biblical Christianity. And like their Puritan forebears, many evangelicals do not stop where Warren leaves them, going farther to connect having a purpose with being prosperous. In a similar integration of American values and religion, the “gospel of health and wealth” has become a significant force among evangelical Christians with work serving as a primary point of reception for God’s abundant blessing. As a result, if the potential affinities with other forms of Christianity are in decline, connections between evangelicals and commerce proliferate.

Of course, mainline Protestants, Catholics, and evangelicals are not a religious monopoly, and religion in the United States is not—nor has it ever been—exclusively Christian. However, the other main tradition of American religion is a faith that some would regard as no faith at all. In *A Republic of Mind and Spirit* (2007), Catherine Albanese referred to it as the “metaphysical tradition,” encompassing theories of mind power,
mysticism, energy, therapy, and healing, plus forms of occultism that existed alongside orthodox Christianity even in Puritan New England.\textsuperscript{47} In popular language today, the descriptor has been “spiritual but not religious.” Spirituality is supposedly free, universal, and open, while religion is dogmatic, particular, and proselytizing. It is thus possible, in the minds of many, to be religious without being spiritual, and most important, it is possible to be spiritual without being religious.\textsuperscript{48} And it is within this perceived dichotomy that new sets of affinities with business have begun to emerge.

Increasingly, spirituality is understood as a private realm of thoughts and experiences whereas “religion” is a public realm of institutions, creeds, and rituals.\textsuperscript{49} The Baby Boomers led the way in this change as they have done in other areas of American culture. Beginning in the 1960s, large numbers of Boomers left the religious traditions of their youth never to return or to return with considerable skepticism toward institutional religion.\textsuperscript{50} Yet they were not the first Americans to engage in metaphysical religion. While it greatly frustrated Puritan religious leaders, even American colonials practiced a religious eclecticism alongside their traditional Christian beliefs. In his book \textit{Spiritual but Not Religious} (2001), Robert Fuller concludes that even for the Puritan faithful, “an aloof, judgmental God failed to mesh with colonists’ desire to fashion a vital spirituality.”\textsuperscript{51} They too wanted something that worked, and they were willing to go outside institutional boundaries to find it.

What they found was abundant and ever present in American life. Over the last decade, as spirituality has seemed to trump religion in the popular imagination, scholars of American religious life have sought to demonstrate how spirituality apart from Christianity is nothing new. Leigh Schmidt, author of \textit{Restless Souls} (2005), named the same tradition “religious liberalism” and included within it the desire for mystical experience, valuing meditation and silence, a fascination with Eastern religious traditions, the idea that all religions have common ideals, and “an emphasis on creative self-expression and adventure-some seeking.”\textsuperscript{52} Together, Albanese’s “metaphysical tradition,” Schmidt’s “religious liberalism,” and what Fuller called “unchurched traditions” form a triumvirate, all identifying the important role of spirituality throughout American history and all trying to contextualize the current explosion in spiritual expressions and practices today.

The Baby-Boom generation still matters to an understanding of American religious life, and so do the 1960s as the decade most important in
shaping the Boomers’ identity. In his monumental work on the Boomers’ faith, Wade Clark Roof noted that the Boomer generation is a “lead cohort” or national trend setter, simply because of their numbers.\(^5\) The key to understanding their impact, however, is the degree to which Boomers, born between 1946 and 1964, engaged the 1960s counterculture of drugs, music, and political activism. Using an index based on surveys, Roof concluded that all Boomers were more prone to drop out of religious institutions than previous generations, but those Boomers with higher levels of exposure to the counterculture dropped out at a rate of 84 percent.\(^5\) In addition, the higher the level of exposure, the more likely Boomers were to identify themselves as “spiritual” and the less likely they were to understand themselves as “religious.” The rates for “spirituality” topped 80 percent while those with low exposure only identified themselves as spiritual at a rate of 33 percent.\(^5\)

Beginning in the 1990s, advocates for workplace spirituality, usually Boomers themselves, began to claim that Boomers were an obvious source for the new interest in spiritual work. In age, they were reaching a period of life when self-reflection and introspection are common. Often they had raised children and reached high points in their career, and after achieving success they wondered what it all meant in the big scheme of things. They were also asking questions about ultimate meaning and significance generally, and when such basic questions were asked, it was only logical that similar questions would be addressed to and in the workplace since this was the location where a majority of their time was spent.\(^5\)

The impact of the 1960s also extended beyond the counterculture. In 1965 a groundbreaking immigration reform law began a religious transformation in the United States so that it was no longer a nation with only different denominations of Christianity as its primary basis of religious diversity. Large numbers of adherents to Islam, Hinduism, Buddhism, and many other smaller sects joined the Christian majority and the long-present Jewish minority. Jews, Muslims, Hindus, and Buddhists have all addressed questions about the meaning of work in some way. Hinduism’s dharma or duty and a caste system connected to occupation, along with Islam’s affirmation of work as an assignment from God, share with Christian theologies of vocation the idea that work has meaning. In Buddhism, which sees human labor as the result of greed, work has a meaning (albeit negative) in the tradition’s cosmology. In understanding contemporary workplace spirituality, the religious traditions of new immigrants are significant, but so too is the religious eclecticism that it intensifies. Religious
traditions now mix and mingle, creating an opportunity for individuals to pick and choose, and for different, religiously defined meanings of work to absorb, morph, and transform.

New Elective Affinities

This book examines contemporary practices of workplace spirituality and demonstrates that they constitute an important religious movement, shaping and being shaped by American business culture. These trends have historical, sociological, and theological contexts that reveal how workplace spirituality frequently serves diverse and sometimes competing functions. Personal fulfillment, increased economic productivity, and moral guidance occur simultaneously amid new economic realities and new forms of economic institutions. But perhaps more important, expressions of workplace spirituality are best interpreted as creative collaborations between the practices and values of contemporary commerce and the diverse meanings of religious and spiritual life. Returning to the language of Max Weber, new forms of both economic life and religion create new opportunities for “elective affinities,” and workplace spirituality as a term captures and consolidates a variety of new affinities into a single yet diverse social movement.

The next chapter traces the roots of spirituality in the business corporation, stretching from the industrial transformation of the nineteenth century to the new knowledge economy of the current day. Looking closely at the history of business in America, it notes the affinity between spirituality and the larger economic movement known as “welfare capitalism” in which corporations rather than the state provide social services. The development of the “human relations” school of management also provided a crucial foundation for workplace spirituality with its concern for personal development and emerging interest in corporate culture. A spiritual workplace is often seen as a more profitable workplace, transforming again the structure of work and creating either a possible win-win situation or a religiously manipulative environment.

Chapter 3 turns to the significance of “Christian companies” as an evangelical expression of spirituality in business. Although most Christian companies are small, this chapter profiles several larger organizations such as Chick-fil-A, ServiceMaster, and Hobby Lobby that have created a different model of workplace spirituality with great attention to personal morality and religious devotion. Small Christian businesses are also
making their mark by joining networks and alerting evangelicals to a distinct Christian subculture in the American economy. As something of an alternative case, the chapter examines Jewish diamond merchants in New York as another business model with a faith-based network. Both large and small faith-based businesses are important sources for workplace spirituality practices, but they may have a more limited impact in an economically complex and religiously diverse nation.

Outside the office, many resources for workplace spirituality are on sale at the local bookstore. The fourth chapter profiles and places into context the plethora of books that appeal to both evangelicals and secular wisdom seekers, in an attempt to make Jesus into a source of leadership and management guidance. Current books like *Jesus, CEO* have important predecessors, but they are best understood in relationship to other contemporary “business guru” books and the increased interest in character following Stephen Covey’s highly successful and influential *The 7 Habits of Highly Effective People*. Within the American religious and economic marketplace, books offer a “do-it-yourself” approach to workplace spirituality and are a significant feature of the overall movement.

As workplace spirituality has gained prominence in corporate offices and American life, business faculties at colleges and universities have taken notice. Chapter 5 describes and analyzes the various ways spirituality has become a part of the business curricula at both public and church-related colleges and universities. Several education institutions are highlighted, including Maharishi University of Management, where Vedic philosophy and transcendental meditation are embedded in all courses, and David Lipscomb University, where students must participate in “Business Administration Students Imitating Christ (BASIC) Training Camp.” The chapter also considers the impact of the Lilly Endowment’s Program for the Theological Exploration of Vocation on the business curricula of the eighty-eight participating college and universities as well as the role of the Academy of Management’s “Management, Spirituality, and Religion” Interest Group in making workplace spirituality a more mainstream academic area.

Outside academia, those seeking a personal guide to workplace meaning may employ a life coach. Chapter 6 describes the field of “life coaching” and its role as a new form of vocational counseling. Mainline Protestants, Roman Catholics, and other faith-based organizations are responding to the workplace spirituality movement by trying to provide their own form of life coaching, reasserting the significance of Christian theologies
of vocation and trying to connect again to business life and practice. This chapter also examines more secular responses to the different forms of the workplace spirituality movement, including the dramatic rise in civil rights complaints related to religion in the workplace and the comic strip *Dilbert*'s satiric look at spirituality as another business fad. The presence of affinities may best be known by the reactions against them.

While some would argue that religion and spirituality in America have been de-centered from traditional religious institutions, they are not totally free floating and have found other institutional homes. The corporate office, the local bookstore, the family business, and the university's business department provide the setting for the new religious movement of workplace spirituality. The concluding chapter situates the workplace spirituality movement within the context of American religious life and assesses its future impact on business, higher education, and traditional religious communities.

While much has been written about workplace spirituality in the last fifteen years, little of it has been scholarly, and among scholars of religion it has received even less attention. For these reasons alone, *Spirituality, Inc.* fills a troublesome scholarly void. But there will always be skeptics. When I presented my early research on workplace spirituality books at an academic meeting, a professional colleague and friend asked, “Why would you want to study that?” My answer then and my answer now is that workplace spirituality is an important frontier in American religion, and it is a means to understand the complex relationship between business and religious faith that has existed for centuries. The “elective affinities” between business and religion will undoubtedly continue. *Spirituality, Inc.* engages several of those that exist today, offering insights into the future of American business culture, American religious life, and their ongoing relationship.