

# FINDING MEANING IN BUSINESS

Theology, Ethics, and Vocation

Edited by  
Bartholomew C. Okonkwo



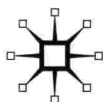
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## Finding Meaning in Business

## P R E F A C E

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We are living through very hard, but equally interesting times, and through a period of another historic crisis of the global capitalist (free market) economy, a crisis so deep that although it began as a global financial crisis it has now engulfed the entire global capitalist/market economy, and the political and sociocultural systems supported by the economy.

In its present phase, the crisis is at once a global economic as well as a global political and sociocultural crisis. Not only are huge corporations and financial institutions going bankrupt and needing large-scale bailouts but so also are whole countries (Greece, Ireland, Spain, Italy, etc.) going bankrupt and needing bailouts of historic proportions.

Since the fall of the Berlin Wall, through the globalization of the 1990s, the scandals of Enron, Arthur Andersen, and WorldCom, and most recent scandals in the financial markets driven by systematic corruption, the challenges of capitalism have been substantial. They have even called into question the credentials of the free market economic system—especially in relation to the need for authentic human development (material and spiritual).<sup>1</sup> A central characteristic of the response of ruling classes and elites right across the world to the global crisis has been to try to bailout subsidies, big businesses, and banks while passing on the burden of recovery and stabilization to the working and toiling peoples, through cuts in social spending (withdrawal of subsidies to the majority), increases in cost of services, and imposition of new levies among other things.

Nevertheless, as they have tried to increase the burden of hardships on the majority, so has the resistance of the majority intensified. The result today is the revolutionary upheaval in the Middle East, the waves of strikes across Europe and the Americas, and the growing unrest in Africa. As millions take to the streets in a global protest against corporate

malfesance, it is good for innovative theoretical thinking to go make way for experience and to ask the sort of simple, basic questions everyone faces: how can we start the business community on the path to recovery? Perhaps the time has come for a new and deeper reflection on the nature of the economy and its purposes. We either disregard these questions, or get satisfied with constrained thinking, conventional behavior, and “pre-cooked” solutions. These choices lead to personal alienation, and it obviously brings to an end any possibility for innovative thinking. Or we can take these questions seriously—and end up heading straight into ultimate questions. And we need realistic answers to ultimate questions in order to act and flourish as intense human beings.

Several books debating the root causes of the current global economic downturn have made their way into public consciousness of late. But a perusal of this platoon of popular books pointed to the greed of the bankers, the escalating fraud, the creation of depraved incentive schemes, and imprudent behavior as causes of the current recession. While these are indeed factors to consider, they alone do not constitute a full explanation. Any solution to the issues and challenges in the marketplace has to start with the current situation and system.

A widely quoted article in business ethics, “The Parable of the Sadhu,” describes a Wall Street executive who (by his own acknowledgment) lost his sense of humanity on a Himalayan mountain-climbing expedition.<sup>2</sup> Because his group was concerned about reaching the summit, he left a holy man that they had found, a sadhu, to die on the slope. Later he lamented, “Why were we so reluctant to try the lower path, the ambiguous trail?; Perhaps because we did not have a leader who could reveal *the greater purpose of the trip* to us.” This parable offers us a way to appreciate the diagnosis of the economic crisis. The pursuit of the objective of reaching the summit is allowed by the climbers to override the unequivocal human need that they met at 18,000 feet. There was a *fixation* on reaching the summit, a *rationalization* for continuing on (“We did our bit”), and eventually a kind of *detachment* or acceptance of the way in which the sadhu was treated.<sup>3</sup>

Once profit becomes the exclusive goal, if it is produced by improper means and without the common good as its ultimate end, it risks destroying wealth and creating poverty. Here I would like to invite economists and financial professionals, as well as political leaders, to recognize the urgency of the need to ensure that economic practices and policies have as their aim the good of every person and of the whole person. While business ethics can move us forward in this reflection and practice, what is taking place in businesses today is not just the loss

of will to do good, but the loss of meaning and, especially, theological meaning, which ultimately demands more than what traditional business ethics and corporate social responsibility can offer. It is to these and similar problems that I have *taken the approach of displacing careerism in favor of business as a vocation as the realistic answer to the problem.*

What seems to be urgently needed is a realization that the great challenge before us, accentuated by the problems of development in this global era and made even more urgent by the economic and financial crisis, is to demonstrate, in thinking and behavior, that not only can traditional principles of social ethics like transparency, honesty, and responsibility not be ignored or attenuated but also that in *commercial relationships*<sup>4</sup> *business and organizational leaders can and must rediscover their personal vocation within normal economic activity.*

By bringing together the most influential papers from International Business conferences of John A. Ryan Institute of the University of St. Thomas, Minnesota, within the last decade, the essays collected in *Finding Meaning in Business* provide to all persons of goodwill an insightful, extended meditation on the kind of practical rationality that is urgently needed to reopen the sources of meaning for our societies and business communities. Here a select group of leading theologians, economists, and ethicists jointly examines the meta-ethical foundations of vocation as a necessary step for business recovery, maintaining the view that solution to the current crisis cannot come through more legislation but through business and organizational leaders finding their vocation or calling in life and in their professions. They argue that the great social and cultural maladies of the modern age all have this one common characteristic: the denial of personal vocation. This denial of vocation, which ultimately denies meaningful work, creates one of the greatest errors of our age, a split between the faith that many profess and their daily lives. This divided life represses any reflection on the spiritual and moral purpose of one's gifts, abilities, and motivations at work, leaving one with few resources to integrate the deepest beliefs of their day-to-day life. The void that is created in an environment of relativity encourages even people with excellent professional or technical educations to hide behind "the firm" or saying that "it's only business." That attitude is the core of an ethic of self-interest that ignores the meaning and rich concept of vocation and focuses solely on the limited and ultimately meaningless concept of career.

Thus, the author's inquiries speak to one another and to the question: the concept has for centuries implicated/connoted the clergy and

the professions of medicine and law, but does the perspective of vocation, or calling, apply to the profession of business and organizational leadership? Is there such a thing as a personal calling to business as a vocation? In three parts these questions have been answered with a resounding “yes!,” stressing the need that unless we confront this serious error of divided life in our culture, and see business as a calling and vocation, we will have little chance to resist the instrumental and economic forces in the various professions.

PART 1: *Business and Calling* takes on this charge and examines what it means to understand business as a calling tackling even more profound questions such as what is the person being called to be or do? Or is the life of a businessperson merely a necessary means, a sequential step to pursue their real vocation somewhere else? The authors begin with an evolutionary process by highlighting the attitudinal, moral, and spiritual differences between one who sees business as a career and one who has a sense of calling in business. Then they draw from both Catholic and Protestant traditions to analyze the meaning of the word “vocation” as well as the historical and theological development of the concept and interpret its applications to business, exploring why business is a vocation and how the concept will help transform the business environment of the future.

PART 2: *Fostering a Community of Work* considers vocation within the framework of the stakeholder theory to generate a place for reflection on the importance of corporation as a community of work where members’ pursue common goods that build real communions by attempting to analyze how we might theologially understand the nature and purpose of organizations, and the practical implications of a theological understanding of organizations for those responsible for leading these institutions on a day-to-day basis. Here the Authors explore what a corporation begins to look like when it takes seriously its call to be an authentic community of work such as the policies, systems, processes, etc. that move the organization as a whole toward this community of work, stressing the need for a culture that fosters the conditions and structures that allow such individuals to act upon their vocation if the calling of the individuals within business are to thrive.

Finally, PART 3: *Formation of Business Leaders* moves to reflect on how from university education it could be possible to develop in our students a knowledge closest to the business world and a broader awareness in respect of themselves, to help them visualize their future professional performance in that environment as a vocation. While we need to be careful about unrealistic expectations of universities to shape the



moral and spiritual character of professionals, what the essays in this part help the university curricula to do is to explore the pressing need for students to think in moral and spiritual terms about their lives as a whole as well as provide for the reader some powerful resources for integration into the curriculum of business education.

Combining creative biblical interpretation, Christian moral reflection, and business expertise *Finding Meaning in Business* is thoughtful and thought-provoking reading that paves the way for the liberation of Christians from the ‘invisible hand’ that seems more and more to dominate every aspect of our economic lives. It is especially commended to anyone seeking to balance the requirements of faith with the demands of economics.

### Notes

1. Paul VI indicates (*Populorum Progressio*, 14) that the essential quality of “authentic” development is that it must be “integral, that is, it has to promote the good of every man and of the whole man.” §18
2. Bowen McCoy, “The Parable of the Sadhu,” *Harvard Business Review* 61, 103 (1983 and reprinted in 1997). Italics added.
3. See K Goodpaster. “Teleopathy,” *The Encyclopedia of Business Ethics and Society* (NY: Sage Publishers, 2007). Fixation, rationalization, and detachment are described and developed.
4. Benedict XVI: *Caritas in veritate* found at [www.vatican.va/holy\\_father/ Benedict XVI/ encyclicals/documents](http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/Benedict_XVI/encyclicals/documents).

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I owe many thanks to the various contributors to this book for the wonderful work they did. Indeed, in the vast panorama of living humanity at home and overseas, it is incredible how God made it possible for me to link up with the tidal wave of personalities of many heights and depths who contributed to this edited collection. It is much better imagined than described, the radiating state of my heart being so loftily extolled and exulted. So I will remain eternally grateful to the contributors for their contributions and collaboration throughout the writing and research of this book.

BARTHOLOMEW C. OKONKWO

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PART 1

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*Business and Calling*



## CHAPTER ONE

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# *Giving Meaning to Work: The Spiritual Challenge of Our Time*

INGEBORG GABRIEL

Since the beginning of this millennium our world has been undergoing drastic transformations, which leaves no area of our lives unaffected. This can particularly be felt in the world of business and affects our attitude toward work as such. Consequences of this development are a growing competition that tends to erode moral values, an exaggerated pressure to succeed, which may become destructive for the physical, moral, and spiritual integrity of the person, and an increasing instability and insecurity of working conditions that negatively affects the motivation to work. It is to these and similar problems that a spirituality of work has to give an answer.

There is, however, an even more profound question with which our contemporary societies and working life are confronted: the drying up of sources of meaning, the loss of a knowledge of man's whereabouts and whereto, which deeply affects our social fabric as a whole and our lives as acting persons. The technical and material changes that take place at an ever-growing pace are no longer connected with socially accepted ultimate goals giving orientation to these developments. This means that individuals have to "produce" their own meaning and to motivate themselves. They have to choose which goals they want to pursue, which type of happiness they want to strive for. The answers of the leading ideologies, which see man mainly as a pleasure or utility maximizer, are of little help. If man's self-interest is understood in a purely material sense it leaves no perspectives for the social and even

less for the spiritual realm. But to become truly creative man needs a deeply rooted belief that what he is doing is good not only for his material well-being, but for his development as a person and, beyond this, for others and the progress of society as a whole? O. Höffe has in this context spoken of a “hedonistic paradox”: the more man strives for happiness in a purely egoistic sense the more happiness evades him and the more frustrated he becomes. The answer to the question of the meaning of work is thereby not only of importance for the life of the individual but also for our culture as a whole.

It is from this cultural perspective that Max Weber asked in the early part of the last century the question of what will happen to our work ethos when the remaining meaning—partly religious, partly secular—that is still present in our societies will have evaporated. Teilhard de Chardin as one of the eminent mystics and religious thinkers of our century was preoccupied with the same question: In which way does the loss of a framework of meaning influence man’s motivation to work? And: which type of spirituality do we need to reopen the sources of meaning for our societies?

### **The Modern Work Ethos and its Limitations**

In all societies of human history before modernity the individual found himself embedded in a dense cultural framework that was grounded in religion and that gave sense and meaning to his life. As Max Weber has demonstrated in the three volumes of “*Die Wirtschaftsethik der Weltreligionen*” the main doctrines of the great world religions—Protestantism, Confucianism, Hinduism, Buddhism, ancient Judaism, and Islam respectively—formed the lifestyles, institutions, and the way men perceived their work in a rather distinctive way. The question that motivated this impressive sociological enterprise was: why did capitalism as the most efficient and rationalized form of business organization develop within the European cultural framework and not elsewhere? Through this he wanted to find an answer to the more existential question: what will be the future of modern man and society? More concretely: what will happen to our culture and economic organization when the religious frameworks that have generated it collapse, for example, when the culturally and religiously given sources of meaning evaporate?

Weber’s answer to these questions was conceived as an implicit critique of Marx. This is already shown in his terminology: when Marx



speaks of capitalism this is a devastating critic of modern society as a whole in the name of justice and the quasi-prophetic proclamation of the doomsday of this society. In Weber the term capitalism simply describes the highly rational way of business organization that came about as a result of wider rationalization processes in the European cultural context. His study on the “Protestant ethics and the spirit of capitalism” (which led to the studies on the other religions) is a congenial attempt to show that the socially influential doctrines of Protestantism (mainly Calvinism) were the precondition for the development of the specific work ethos needed to bring about the dynamics of capitalism. It rested on three pillars: the religious calling of each Christian to a specific status and work, the asceticism this calling demanded, and the emphasis that was placed on material wealth and success gained through this work.

1) In medieval Christianity a religious calling had been limited to the members of the religious orders. Protestantism asserted that every Christian was to work to honor God and thus gave the highest possible dignity to all forms of work.

2) Not only was the idea of the calling extended to all Christians but also to the ascetic demands originally associated with it in the monastic tradition. Weber speaks of an inner-worldly asceticism that was the motivating force for the rationalization of the lifestyle constituting the basis of capitalism. However, in this process also a shift of emphasis took place. The basic rule of the monastic ethos, the Benedictian rule “ora et labora” changed into a “labora et ora” work becoming predominant over contemplation. It is first and foremost through and in work that God is glorified. The mystical dimension of faith is thus relegated to the background and work becomes important in itself. Without expounding the complex cultural reasons for this development it leads to an ever more one-sided emphasis on a rationalization of lifestyle for which individual efficiency values like thriftiness in the use of time and material resources have priority over spiritual and social values. The latter are weakened because of the inherent individualism of the Protestant traditions. It should be noted here that Ignatian spirituality that grows out in the same time within the Catholic tradition newly defines the relationship between the mystic and work dimensions through the famous formulae of “contemplatives in action” or to find God in all things.

3) The third notion that Weber sees as central to the work ethos of capitalism is the emphasis it places on material success. The hypothesis he developed to explain this is somewhat daring: According to the Calvinist doctrine the individual cannot contribute anything to his salvation