



Spiritual and religious diversity in the workplace. Implications for leadership

Douglas A. Hicks

Jepson School of Leadership Studies, University of Richmond, Richmond, VA 23173, USA

Accepted 9 May 2002

Abstract

This article offers a critical analysis of scholarship on spirituality and leadership. The article argues that the concept of spirituality is more disparate and contested than the current leadership literature acknowledges. It asserts that spirituality is often defined in opposition to religion and that this opposition is not an accurate description of a complex interrelationship. Scholars who uphold a view of bringing the “whole person” to work are inconsistent if they view spirituality as appropriate in the workplace but exclude diverse employees’ particular, specific religious expressions from it. The concluding section offers implications from this critical exploration of leadership and spirituality and suggests that the task of effective organizational leadership is not to promote a single spiritual framework but, rather, to create a structure and culture in which leaders and followers can respectfully negotiate religious and spiritual diversity.

© 2002 Elsevier Science Inc. All rights reserved.

1. Contested and problematic accounts of spirituality and leadership

A recent issue of *The Leadership Quarterly* includes reviews of books on leadership and spirituality (Bailey, 2001; Bowling, 2001; Hamilton & Schriesheim, 2001; Harvey, 2001; Hoojiberg, 2001). The reviewers make it clear that the disparate body of writings on leadership and spirituality lack a central focus and a rigorous, well-defined methodology.

Critically assessing one well-known text, James R. Bailey asserts that “even something as ephemeral and intensely personal as spirituality could benefit from some structural intent” (p. 368). Jerry R. Harvey adds that the literature on spirituality and leadership tends

E-mail address: dhicks@richmond.edu (D.A. Hicks).

to avoid reference to specific or particular religious concepts; authors opt for terms that are seemingly less contested, such as “spirit” and “community.” Harvey contends that most authors fail to address the most potentially divisive, and most important, issues of religion and spirituality in leadership. This article builds upon these criticisms by arguing that the spirituality and leadership literature depends upon problematic assumptions, concepts, and definitions. It suggests further that the task of effective organizational leadership is not to promote a single spiritual framework but, rather, to create a structure and culture in which leaders and followers can respectfully negotiate religious and spiritual diversity.

Scholars of spirituality and leadership work within an intellectual context that assumes, explicitly or implicitly, that public spheres like politics and the workplace are secular. That is, at least until recently, most leadership theories have not attended to the role of religion or spirituality in political or workplace institutions. In this way, leadership studies have reflected the social sciences’ attempt to model modern, rational spheres of public life as free from the duties and trappings of religion (see [Bailey & Eastman, 1994](#); [Milbank, 1990](#)). Critics from a variety of perspectives on spirituality and leadership, however, have called into question some aspects of the public-as-secular view. For instance, [Mitroff and Denton \(1999a, 1999b\)](#) argue that employees should be allowed to bring their personal identity into the workplace, including their spiritual ideas and expressions. Such theories reject the privatization of spiritual beliefs on the grounds that it forces people to fragment their lives and deny the essential aspects of their identity when they are working or are engaged in civic or political activities.

Even as they criticize the framework of a secular workplace, these scholars tend to accept uncritically a strict distinction between spirituality and religion. In this frequently repeated view, religion is institutional, dogmatic, and rigid; spirituality is personal, emotional, and adaptable to an individual’s needs. Authors have relied upon this dichotomy to offer a simplistic solution to the secular framework: spiritual language, symbols, and rituals should be acceptable in the workplace, but religious talk and action remain unacceptable. Adherents of this approach to workplace leadership tend to downplay the potentially contentious nature of things spiritual, even as they maintain that religious matters are divisive.

This article develops [Bailey’s \(2001\)](#) assertion that “a meaningful conversation about spirituality sans religion is dubious” (p. 367). It critically examines the spirituality–religion dichotomy upon which so many scholars in leadership depend. The article builds a case to argue that the mantra “spirituality unites, but religion divides” is much more problematic than scholars of spiritual leadership in the workplace would have us believe. It asserts that the corresponding definitions of spirituality are too broad to be coherent and that leadership scholars’ frequent emphasis on the potential of spirituality to create unity or common ground in the workplace overlooks difficult and divisive issues.

Public discussions about the potential of religious and spiritual motivation to move leaders and followers to act for both good and ill are complicated by the fact that America is one of the most religiously diverse nations in the world ([Eck, 2001](#)). Acknowledging the complex nature of the phenomena of religion and spirituality (and the problems of imposing a simple opposition between them) will allow for more rigorous analyses of their role in the processes of leadership.

A premise of this article is that current approaches to spirituality and religion in leadership studies are flawed because they fail to acknowledge religious diversity, or they assume that such diversity can be overlooked by common reference to leaders' and followers' spirituality instead of their religious beliefs or practices. The point of this essay is not to offer a superior view of "spiritual leadership" or "religious leadership." Rather, the article argues that a leadership framework is needed in which conflicting views and practices of a diverse workforce—including religious, spiritual, political, cultural, and other differences—can be negotiated within organizations. Much of the argument of this article is critical of current approaches to spirituality and leadership, though implications are also offered for leadership theories and practices that can acknowledge and manage healthy conflict amidst diversity of various kinds.

The argument proceeds in the following way: Section 2 discusses how spirituality is often defined, problematically, in opposition to religion in leadership studies. Section 3 argues that leadership scholars who uphold a view of bringing the "whole person" to work are inconsistent if they view spirituality as appropriate in the workplace but exclude employees' religious expression from it. Sections 4, 5, and 6 argue from different perspectives—philosophical and theological ideas, religious and spiritual practices, and "nonreligious" views of spirit—that the concept of spirituality is much more wide-ranging and contested than the current leadership literature acknowledges. The concluding section asserts that a more complex framework for negotiating spirituality and religion in organizations is needed. Implications are offered for developing leadership theories and practices in which leaders understand religious differences and other kinds of diversity both as potential sources of conflict and as potentially beneficial sources of innovation.

2. The opposition of spirituality and religion

For many scholars of leadership, the definition of spirituality is offered by way of the *via negativa*—that is, spirituality is not religion. Jay Conger's lead essay in the widely read book *Spirit at Work* (Conger & associates 1994) contains a section entitled "Spirituality and Religion: Is There a Difference?" Conger answers his own question in the affirmative. Other leadership scholars do the same. Cacioppe (2000) discusses spirituality in this way:

The meaning of the term spirituality is often misunderstood and can have negative connotations for many people. Spirituality is often seen in the same context as organized religion, with particular beliefs, moral rules and traditions. Spirituality, however, is not formal, structured, or organized. Organized religion has more of an external focus where spirituality involves a person looking inward and therefore is accessible to everyone whether religious or not. Religion often has salvation as its major aim. Spirituality is above and beyond any specific religious denomination and seeks to find and experience the common principles and truths that each religion offers. (p. 51)

Bhindi and Duignan (1997) express a similar sentiment:

[We] make a plea for the restoration of spirituality in leadership. By spirituality a partisan religious view is not meant, but that individuals and groups should experience a sense of deep

and enduring meaning and significance from an appreciation of their interconnectedness and interdependency, and from their feelings of being connected to something greater than the self. (p. 126)

In their recent book, *A Spiritual Audit of Corporate America*, Mitroff and Denton (1999a) claim an empirical basis for building a leadership framework around the opposition between spirituality and religion. Mitroff and Denton (1999a, 1999b) maintain that the majority of managers whom they surveyed or interviewed are positive toward spirituality but negative toward religion.¹ There is little doubt that this opposition is commonly held, not simply among leadership scholars, but also among those leaders and managers who are proponents of spirituality in the workplace. The fact that such a view has wide currency, of course, does not make it either correct or helpful for understanding effective leadership in diverse organizations.

According to the frequently stated framework of spiritual leadership, spirituality holds the potential to bring together a workforce or organization. Biberman and Witty (1999) concisely state an underlying assumption of the literature: “A basic workplace spirituality can be the common ground for the new work community” (p. 170). When it is opposed to religion—defined as partisan and rigid—spirituality then stands for those unifying and adaptable values that all people are supposed to hold. Spirituality is assumed to be a dimension of the human being that is shared by all persons. Anticipating the charge by critics concerned about the potentially divisive nature of spirituality, leadership scholars invoke the religion–spirituality dichotomy to state that if a practice or belief is controversial, it is probably religious and not simply spiritual. Any possible conflict is thus defined away.

Many accounts of spiritual leadership accept as unproblematic the view that religions can be culled for their essential insights while leaving behind the other parts of tradition and communal practices that might create disagreement or simply be inconvenient for modern, busy individuals. Appeal to particular religions in a religiously diverse context is “not energy giving, but divisive” and “can encourage distrust,” according to Gerald Cavanagh (1999, p. 190). He does not allow for the possibility that people from different religious traditions could communicate their differences to one another without reducing traditions to their “core values.” Rather, after noting that not all aspects of the spirituality movement are helpful, he asserts that Christians and Jews can find common ground with the “positive features” of workplace spirituality. The points that are “congruent with traditional Judeo-Christian traditions” are these:

- People in the movement generally have a belief in God.
- Emphasis on quiet, prayer, and contemplation in one’s life.

¹ Mitroff and Denton report a return rate of only 6.6% of the questionnaires mailed out to human relations (HR) executives. They note: “We don’t know at this point if the responses are typical of HR executives in general, although they do match the responses of the HR executives we interviewed in person” (Mitroff & Denton, 1999b, p. 85; see also Mitroff & Denton 1999a, p. 35). It would not be surprising if the persons who returned the survey were, as a whole, predisposed favorably to the spirituality and leadership movement, which, as is discussed in the text, frequently makes the spirituality–religion distinction.

- Emphasis on the centrality of people and listening to others. This generally results in better relations with family and colleagues.
- A commitment to better relations among peoples, and to help bring greater peace and harmony in the world.
- The movement is optimistic about the perfectibility of human nature and business culture; they are convinced that people and the world can become better.
- Commitment to a sustainable environment, so to pass on a better world to future generations. (pp. 191–192)

This approach fails to acknowledge that the distinctive traditions of Christianity and Judaism entail complex and varied religious ideas and practices, and it does not recognize the various constructive and critical resources they might allow adherents to bring to leadership and the workplace. Rather, these six ideas become the elements of workplace spirituality to which Christians or Jews could give their assent. Cavanagh acknowledges the argument of legal scholar [Stephen Carter \(1993\)](#) that contemporary American public life tends to trivialize or to be hostile to religion. Despite the fact that Cavanagh cites Carter approvingly, Cavanagh's own reductionist approach contributes to the trivialization of religion in the leadership literature.

In the various frameworks of spiritual leadership, good leaders are those people who are able to unite an organization around spiritual values. [Konz and Ryan \(1999, pp. 200–201\)](#) even call for leaders to make a “role shift from manager to spiritual guide” in order to facilitate making organizations “into places of spiritual development.” Models of spirituality and leadership that overlook or dismiss the differences of religious beliefs or practices among leaders and followers allow for such elisions between individual spirituality and institutional spiritual leadership, and such models enable scholars to suggest that organizational leaders can or should be spiritual guides. The problematic nature of such a conception is discussed in the following sections.

3. Spirituality, the “whole person,” and organizational leadership

The opposition between spirituality and religion creates a problem for leadership scholars who acknowledge that the “whole person” comes to work. On this point, once again, Mitroff and Denton are representative. They posit that keeping spirituality and work separate is wrongheaded—and futile—because they recognize that people bring their whole selves to the workplace. In language that echoes Gill Robinson Hickman's person-centered management ([Hickman & Lee, 2001; Robinson, 1988](#)), they criticize the view that

spiritual matters . . . are best dealt with outside of work, on employees' own time and in the particular way of their choosing. Armed with such rationales, most organizations kid themselves that by erecting a “Chinese wall” between the so-called private concerns of their employees and the public demands of their businesses, they can keep them strictly separated. ([Mitroff & Denton, 1999a, pp. 5–6](#))

Mitroff and Denton thus reject a framework that keeps “so-called private issues” out of the workplace domain. They propose, in effect, breaking down the Great Wall, because it is ineffective. That wall obstructs the “power and potential inherent in the soul,” and it denies the reality that human beings are spiritual as much as they are physical.

However, in the same discussion, Mitroff and Denton accept the view that religion is inappropriate and out-of-bounds. They fear that workers will “proselytiz[e] for a particular religion” (p. 6). They fail to explain why excluding religion from the workplace is not inconsistent with their view of bringing the whole person to the workplace. After giving a strong defense of spiritual expression at work, they overlook or choose to avoid the fact that, for many leaders and followers, religious commitment and practices are a fundamental part of that same whole person.

On efficiency grounds, Mitroff and Denton might well respond that if religious expressions were admitted, the ensuing conflicts would outweigh the gains in productivity from allowing that part of the whole person into the workplace. They do not provide such an argument. Even if that cost–benefit calculation was proven in particular cases, it would not address the inconsistency of including that part of the whole person called “spirituality” and excluding that called “religion.” It also assumes that organizational leaders are able to distinguish readily between spirituality and religion. If, as Mitroff and Denton would claim, the spiritual values capture the essence of religious values, it is curious that their framework depends so heavily on the opposition of the two.²

Gilbert Fairholm (1998) makes a similar call for integration of the whole self within the leadership process. Fairholm maintains that leading without drawing upon the spirituality of employers and workers is to overlook the “essence of who we are” (p. 113). Human life is about the spirit, he maintains, and spirit “must manifest itself in both our personal and professional lives” (p. 111). But Fairholm includes this footnote:

While important, the religious nature of spirituality is not considered here. This aspect of spirituality is better accommodated in doctrinaire religions and their social instrumentalities. Indeed, many, including this author, would object to matters of personal religion being introduced in the workplace. (p. 113)

Like Mitroff and Denton, Fairholm undermines his own leadership framework for the integrated person when he dismisses the possibility of appropriate religious expression by individuals within the workplace.

The general question of the “whole person” as discussed in leadership studies raises questions that are beyond the scope of this article. The literature should clarify that acknowledging that the “whole person” somehow comes to work is not the same as saying that any kind of behaviors, attitudes, or manners of dress or speech are acceptable in the workplace.³ Rather, formal rules and informal culture—ideally based on careful reflection of

² The author thanks an anonymous referee for emphasizing this point.

³ The author is grateful to a second anonymous referee for suggesting I acknowledge the multiple dimensions and potential misunderstandings associated with the language of the “whole person.”

what is normatively desirable—are still required to determine what expressions are acceptable within a given organizational context. This section has attempted to show, however, that the spirituality–religion distinction is not a tenable way to make such a determination of what is acceptable and what is not.

4. Is spirituality unifying for leadership?

Section 2 suggested that the very dichotomy of spirituality and religion helps reinforce the view that spirituality is unifying, and Section 3 demonstrated how that opposition leads some advocates of spiritual leadership to offer inconsistent grounds for admitting employees' spirituality, but not religion, into the workplace. But what is spirituality? Some of the scholars of and "experts" on spirituality and leadership choose not to provide a definition of spirituality for, as they claim, it might create conflict. In such a view, providing a definition could imply the very kind of dogmatic rigidity that spirituality is meant to transcend. This section asserts, however, that the failure of leadership scholars to define spirituality with precision not only avoids creating division but also overlooks tensions, ambiguities, and diversity that already exist.

Mitroff and Denton (1999a), drawing from their surveys and interviews, provide an 11-point definition of spirituality. They begin, not surprisingly, with three points in opposition to religion: First, "[i]n contrast to conventional religion, spirituality is not formal, structured, or organized." Second, "[s]pirituality is not denominational." And third, as opposed to the partisan nature of religion, "[s]pirituality is broadly inclusive; it embraces everyone." The claims the authors make in their subsequent points are wide-ranging. Spirituality is defined as being "universal and timeless," "the ultimate source and provider of meaning and purpose," "the sacredness of everything," and "the deep feeling of interconnectedness of everything," among other descriptions (pp. 23–25).

Mitroff and Denton go to great lengths to assert that many or most people in the workplace hold such views. Yet to claim that spirituality is a source of common ground is simply to overlook the deeply contested nature of some of these statements. Is spirituality itself a personal agent—as in "[s]pirituality is the ultimate source and provider of meaning and purpose" (p. 24)? This is just one place in which the term "spirituality" seems to stand in as a term for "God." Many Christians, Jews, and Muslims, at least, would maintain that God, not an abstract notion of spirituality, is "the ultimate source and provider of meaning and purpose."

Another statement in the Mitroff–Denton definition raises a related issue: "[Spirituality] was there prior to and subsequent to creation" (p. 25). Jews, Muslims, and Christians would make this claim about God, but not necessarily about spirituality. If spirituality is not simply a polite (i.e., nondivisive) way of saying "God," what would it mean to assert that spirituality existed prior to creation, a time at which, presumably, no humans and no earth existed? If "spirituality" does mean "God," then the spirituality–religion opposition does not hold.

A person might reply that "spirituality" can mean "God" for some people but not for others; in that approach, then, unity is being sought by simply redefining potential conflicts as

common beliefs. It is possible to reply, alternatively, that these questions do not need to be answered in order for spirituality to be important in people's lives. (This author happens to agree on that point). But to assert without further discussion that these phrases or terms somehow create common ground is to overlook the complex philosophical and theological issues that they pose.

Based on a reading of some 100 articles on leadership and workplace spirituality, the compiled list in [Table 1](#) includes words that occur frequently in discussions and proposed definitions of spirituality. Like Mitroff and Denton, other scholars provide a multifaceted definition of spirituality. (As one example, refer to the "elements of spiritual leadership" offered by [Fairholm, 1998, p. 138.](#)) These words are grouped into eight "clusters" that may help to give the list some semblance of order. Even broken down in this way, each cluster holds an immense breadth of possible meanings. The supposed common ground that spiritual leadership is intended to create is common only if the important distinctions among these terms are not acknowledged.

In the abstract, few if any of these terms are objectionable. But as abstractions, they provide little more precision than the term "spirituality" itself does. That is, most of these words are extremely rich; yet like spirituality, they need careful specification. Similar to the elements of the Mitroff–Denton definition, any one of these terms or clusters of terms is philosophically and theologically complicated and contested. They parallel, for example, Christian *theological* discussions concerning who God is [e.g., is God the ultimate concern ([Tillich, 1951](#)), or is God the actively engaged sovereign and transformer of human society ([Niebuhr, 1941, 1951](#))?]; who human beings are [e.g., are humans creatures whose purpose is found when they submit to God's call ([Barth, 1960](#)), or are they agents who have been called by God to struggle for justice ([Gutiérrez, 1973](#))?]; and what faith is [e.g., is faith the belief in and response to statements about God ([Calvin, 1961](#)), or is it a feeling of absolute dependence ([Schleiermacher, 1996](#))?]. They also mirror contemporary *philosophical* debates about who human persons are [e.g., are humans autonomous individual agents ([Rawls, 1971](#)), or are they interconnected selves in community ([Sandel, 1982](#))?].

Renaming perennial philosophical or theological issues does not resolve them. Indeed, the hard work of resolving potential conflicts is left for leaders and followers in the workplace (and elsewhere in public life). The common ground that spiritual leadership claims to create does not address the kinds of conflicts that leaders and followers might actually face in the workplace, such as the accommodation of religious dress, or the need for flexible work schedules, or a policy addressing employees (or bosses) who communicate their faith at work. To be sure, the underlying theological and philosophical debates likewise do not address the everyday work of organizational leadership. That is the point: This critique of spiritual leadership is not a call for leaders and followers to embrace a common theology or philosophy. On the contrary, it simply acknowledges that conflict may result amidst a diverse workforce and that appeal to abstract principles (or religious dogmas) will not solve them. Effective leadership that recognizes and steers amidst diversity is needed to help diverse employees to work together.

Table 1

The variety of terms frequently offered in definitions of spirituality

Self-actualization
Self-fulfillment
Self-awareness
Self-consciousness
Self-discovery

Wholeness
Holism
Integration
Integrity
Authenticity
Balance
Harmony

Meaning
Purpose

Emotion
Passion
Feeling
Heart

Life force
Energy
Vitality
Life
Intrinsic motivation

Virtue
Wisdom
Discernment
Courage
Creativity

Morality
Values
Peace
Truth
Freedom
Justice

Interconnectedness
Interdependence
Interrelationship
Cooperation
Community
Teamwork

5. Which leadership practices count as spiritual (and which do not)?

What happens when we consider specific actions and interactions of leaders and followers in the workplace? This section suggests that many situations or examples of spirituality are potentially conflict-ridden—similar in kind to encounters of religion in the workplace.

In an article in *Personnel Journal*, Patricia Hardin (1995) interviewed a number of business executives and human relations professionals who use nontraditional methods to hire new employees. Their methods include reading tarot cards, consulting psychics, using Enneagrams, and analyzing handwriting samples. Psychics and graphologists alike reported a steady business from employers who utilize their services. The article ran with this header: “Spirituality.” Are these practices to be included under the umbrella of spiritual leadership?

What other practices fit within the spirituality rubric? When coworkers seek to analyze another worker’s “aura,” or to convince others to meditate at work, or to engage in sunset watching from a conference room (see Laabs, 1995), are they exercising their spirituality? The abstract definitions do not provide much help in determining what actions or practices are properly spiritual. They also are limited in the ability to differentiate between what is potentially unifying and what is divisive.

What about practices that adherents explicitly name as “religious”—for instance, individual religious people (Christians, Jews, Muslims, etc.) who recite prayers or wear religious garb to work? Examples here include Christians who place a Bible on their desk or Christian posters in their cubicle; Muslim women who wear the head-scarf, *hijab*, to work; or Sikhs who wear a ritual dagger, *kirpan*, under their clothing. Of course, within the spirituality–religion opposition, these cases can be defined as “religious,” and not “spiritual,” and thus deemed inappropriate in the workplace. Some leadership scholars, though, assert that such religious expressions are not out-of-bounds as long as they are undertaken without “bothering” their coworkers. (Reasonable accommodation of religious prayer and garb is also required by law. On the legal dimensions of religious expression in the workplace, see Schopf, 1997 and Wolf, Friedman, & Sutherland, 1998.)

This brief examination of practices reveals that the discussion of abstract elements of spirituality does not capture the everyday leadership challenges of what practices should be permitted in the workplace and which should not. Legal requirements of religious accommodation are more practical than lists of spirituality, but good and effective leadership requires more than minimal adherence to laws. Through either organizational policies or through informal norms, employees should know what is acceptable religious or spiritual expression at work. Determining such a structure and culture requires the hard work of a leadership process, not reference to abstract spiritual concepts.

6. Spirituality or community spirit?

Another problematic aspect of defining spiritual leadership concerns not those potentially coercive or controversial ideas and practices, but seemingly innocuous ones. Some discussions of spiritual values do not make clear just what is spiritual about the values

being discussed. In their article on “Spirit and Community at Southwest Airlines: An Investigation of a Spiritual Values-Based Model,” John Milliman, Jeffery Ferguson, David Trickett, and Bruce Condemi explain that Southwest’s spiritual values include four elements: “a strong emphasis on community,” “employees feel[ing] they are part of a cause,” the “empowerment of all employees,” and a cultural emphasis on “emotional and humor aspects”—all of which contribute to a corporate culture of “enthusiasm and commitment” (Milliman, Ferguson, et al., 1999). Are these spiritual values? If so, what sorts of values would not be spiritual values? Is the adherence to these values an example of spiritual leadership?

Judith Neal, one of the leading scholars of workplace spirituality, lists Stephen Covey’s *Seven Habits of Highly Effective People* (Covey, 1989) as the first recommendation on her list of “resources that help individuals integrate work and spirituality.” Covey’s work “is intended to move people from dependence to independence to interdependence.” Neal notes that in *Seven Habits* and in his co-authored book, *First Things First* (Covey, Merrill, & Merrill, 1994), Covey contributes to understanding work and spirituality because his texts “focus on the deeper priorities in life” (Neal, 1997, p. 129). Are the insights that Covey offers to students of management and leadership best classified as spirituality?

Finally, does *The Wizard of Oz* offer a tradition that can provide resources for making workplace leadership more spiritual? Biberman, Whitty, and Robbins (1999) argue in the affirmative within their essay in a journal volume on “Spirituality in Organizations.”

We believe that for organizations and individuals the key to spiritual change lies in transformation which must come from within. Using *The Wizard of Oz* as a metaphor, we explain how an organization can balance its intellect, emotionality and sense of purpose; and we recommend steps organizations can take in each area to achieve this balance. (p. 244)

The authors draw upon the narrative of *The Wizard of Oz* itself and upon later analyses of the book and film to argue for balance and wholeness in the workplace. They assert that “[h]ope is found in the human spirit and activated through such cultural stories as that of Oz” (p. 244). They proceed to argue that corporations should judge their success, not on the single criterion of profit, but on many criteria of success, including production but also distribution (p. 252). It is not problematic to draw upon rich cultural narratives to develop a moral argument. Exercising the “literary imagination” can be helpful to this end (Nussbaum, 1995). Yet it is not clear from this discussion why or how this use of the literary imagination—this appeal to Oz—is a spiritual one.

It is possible to define spiritual leadership, of course, to include any appeal to the “human spirit” or “community spirit” or “team spirit.” In such a case, then, spirituality is expansive enough to include almost any positive value or feature. Some scholars of spirituality and leadership, though, would surely reject one or more of these examples (i.e., the community focus of Southwest Airlines, *Seven Habits*, or *The Wizard of Oz*) as having to do with spiritual leadership. As in the previous section, this section suggests that the debate over what is spiritual or not is contested and requires further clarification. However, the issue here is not controversial practices that may be part of spiritual leadership. It is, instead, the question of naming as spiritual some arguably helpful practices of organizational leadership. In neither

case does the label help leaders or followers in the hard work of resolving potential conflicts over diversity in the workplace.

7. Implications for understanding and practicing leadership

The current literature on spirituality and leadership does not often capture the depth of commitment of spiritual, religious, or moral obligations. These fundamental commitments necessarily affect the ways in which employees look and behave in the workplace. Through differences of dress, speech, practices, and holidays, religious and spiritual diversity can contribute to conflicts in the contemporary, diverse workplace. Religious convictions are often deeply held and in many cases include obligations of adherents that centrally affect how they appear and act—and who they are.

The spirituality and leadership literature often seems to imply that conflict is an unhealthy component of a workplace. At least this is a message sent by the strong desire to achieve common ground and unity among a workforce by appeals to spiritual leadership. It is important to acknowledge the value of human cooperation and teamwork. (Many analysts emphasize the efficiency grounds for achieving teamwork, but there are intrinsic as well as instrumental reasons to value it.) Yet conflict is a part of any workplace—even the one that tirelessly purges religious expression from it.

Scholars of leadership state that spirituality is multifaceted and that giving it a single definition would require limiting spirituality. In the quest for simplicity, descriptive or normative models should be careful not to overlook complexities and potential disagreements (whether or not these scholars choose to include religion alongside spirituality in the discussion). As the research of Wade Clark Roof, Robert Wuthnow, and other sociologists makes clear, many Americans speak in terms of spirituality and even understand themselves to be somehow spiritual (Roof, 1993, 1999; Wuthnow, 1998). However, Roof, in particular, has also shown that people mean many different things by the term. If the discussion of spirituality was more carefully developed, the disparate faith expressions and potential and realized divisions would become clear. This enterprise does not require offering a single definition of spirituality, but rather, it necessitates the delineation of the ways in which different leaders and followers holding different and often divergent views of religion and spirituality manage to work effectively together.

The analysis of this article, showing that both the current treatment of spirituality and the avoidance of religion are flawed approaches to leadership in a diverse workplace, suggests the need for leadership scholars to develop theories that include religious differences within the purview of significant employee diversity; such diversity can be a source of both conflict and innovation. While it is beyond the scope of this article to develop all of the implications, the analysis opens up space for scholars working on superior–subordinate relations, employee diversity, organizational culture, and ethics to develop models that are alternatives to either the “secular workplace” model or the “spiritual leadership” model. Scholars in various areas of leadership studies can incorporate spiritual and religious diversity more fully

into their frameworks. The following paragraphs state two general implications for leadership theory that follow from this article and then offer the general contours of an approach to religious and spiritual diversity that this author is developing.

First, this analysis suggests expanding leadership approaches to diversity and conflict in order to attend to religiously based conflict. Given that conflict can be destructive or constructive, scholars from various areas of leadership studies have argued that healthy organizational environments not only allow common ground to be built but also that organizations can benefit from respectful, honest conflict. [James MacGregor Burns \(1978, 2002\)](#) has argued that in the political sphere, the effective expression of conflicting ideas and policies is a sign of a healthy democratic process. Leaders should not be afraid of conflict, but rather, they should encourage dissenting views to be brought out and discussed. In her work on collaborative leadership among organizations, [Barbara Gray \(1989\)](#) emphasizes how a variety of conflicting perspectives can be brought together—she compares collaborative leadership to the New England town meeting in which differences are aired in public—for positive outcomes. Although neither Burns nor Gray addresses religious or spiritual diversity directly, their respective frameworks demonstrate how conflict of various kinds can be employed constructively.

In their work on leadership in diverse organizations, [Fernandez and Barr \(1993\)](#) argue for the importance of “productive conflict” in which differences are not avoided, but expressed. They cite a number of studies in which “heterogeneous groups” outperform “homogeneous groups” if they benefit from leadership that helps create a context in which members come to know and understand their differences. Similarly, [Hickman \(1998\)](#) suggests that leadership studies should utilize the concept of “conflict capital” (presumably echoing conversations of financial capital, human capital, and social capital) through which “a substantially enhanced outcome . . . results from the effort to bring about change among leaders and participants with diverse perspectives” (p. 408).

The positive view towards conflict in the work of Burns, Gray, Fernandez and Barr, and Hickman is consistent with the argument for not overlooking but attending to religious or spiritual diversity in the workplace. Leaders can see faith-based perspectives not only as a source of conflict, but also as a potential source of innovation. The starting place is not the common ground or unity that is assumed in prevailing frameworks of spiritual leadership. Rather, if cooperation, mutual understanding, or even some kind of unity is achieved, it is reached through a leadership process of open dialogue and sharing of ideas, not by assumption or definition. The analysis of this article suggests the incorporation of faith-based differences alongside other forms of diversity into such theories and approaches will contribute to the understanding and practice of good workplace leadership.

The implications of this article can also be constructively related to the work of [Ronald A. Heifetz \(1994\)](#). Acknowledging the reality and the potentially valuable role of conflict, Heifetz argues that leadership (both with and without authority) requires creating an environment in which participants are uncomfortable with their internal and external conflicts, but not so uncomfortable that they cannot productively address them. The task of leadership is not to impose one set of values upon all followers but to “orchestrate” conflict in order to achieve a desirable outcome. The very conflicts among the values that

individual parties bring to the discussion may be invaluable in reaching a good result. Although formal leaders have more ways to influence the process, leaders with and without authority can help create structures and cultures to negotiate conflict. While Heifetz rarely considers religious or spiritual diversity as a chief source of internal (or external) conflict, his theory of adaptive work and orchestration of conflict offers one way to view those forms of diversity within a workforce as potentially destructive and as potentially constructive.

In addition to the importance of acknowledging and addressing conflict, the second implication of this paper's analysis is that it is neither fully possible nor fruitful to draw sharp lines between religious, spiritual, political, or cultural spheres of life. Not only religious persons, but all persons, bring the basic aspects of their identity to the workplace. (This is the descriptive force of some leadership scholars' emphasis on the "whole person.") Employees' views and actions related to politics, culture, art, spirituality, religion, and even family commitments can be potentially divisive. None of these aspects of human activity, though, should be considered divisive in most or all cases.

Given the potentially conflictual nature of various kinds of expression, religion should not be treated as *a priori* different from other kinds. In any given organization, leaders will face distinct, context-specific challenges and opportunities to negotiate various forms of diversity. In this author's view, effective leadership does not determine categories of human activity that are acceptable (e.g., religious speech is unacceptable, but spiritual language is fine), but rather, it creates formal and informal norms to promote as much employee expression as possible without allowing coercion of other employees. To be sure, such an approach will not settle difficult cases, but it can provide a more workable framework in which to make fair, hard decisions in a given organizational context.

An effective leadership process does not need to allow all spiritual or religious expressions by bosses or employees into the workplace—but the critical evaluation needed to assess their role in people's lives, their potential value, and their potential dangers should proceed along similar grounds for all matters of values, attitudes, and practices that employers and workers bring into the workplace (see [Thiemann, 1996](#)). That is, it is not even necessary to determine whether an idea or practice is spiritual and/or religious—or for that matter, political, cultural, or social—in order for it to be evaluated as appropriate or inappropriate.

Given these two general implications about (1) the importance of recognizing conflict and (2) the interrelationship of different aspects of employee identity, the analysis of this article suggests that procedural frameworks of leadership are needed that allow employers and employees to negotiate religious, spiritual, and other forms of diversity—without requiring organizational leaders to resolve theological and philosophical issues. This author is developing one such framework of "respectful pluralism." Under the conditions of respectful pluralism, employees are able to express, to a significant degree, their religious and spiritual as well as political, cultural, and other commitments within the workplace.

The presumption of respectful pluralism, building upon the basic dignity of employees, is that a high degree of personal employee expression should be permitted in the workplace. Title VII of the Civil Rights Act, which protects employees against discrimination and harassment based on many aspects of identity, including religion, guarantees the minimum conditions of such expression. Although the approach of respectful pluralism goes beyond

these legal minimums in allowing expression at work, it does not require that just any individual action is appropriate at work simply because an employee claims that it is a part of his or her identity. Rather, respectful pluralism also must create limits on personal expression (whether religious, spiritual, or otherwise), based on whether or not other employees experience coercion or degradation from an employee's expression. The essential criteria of inclusion or exclusion would be the same whether the expression is seen to be religious, cultural, political, or otherwise.

The determination of what constitutes appropriate expression—as well as coercion or degradation of others—cannot be settled in the abstract. Good leadership structures and cultures must be established in particular workplace contexts in order to negotiate potential conflicts. If a workplace of respectful pluralism has been established, the leadership process will have difficult “cases” to settle, but the basic context, understandings, and precedents have already been set.

It is important to note that the approach of respectful pluralism considers the religious or spiritual expression of formal leaders to be more potentially problematic than similar expression by employees who are not formal leaders. Stated directly, leaders' individual expression may easily be mistaken for institutionally supported expression. Because they have formal power, their invitations may be interpreted as coercive, regardless of intention. The faith expression of formal leaders is complex, because managers and employers, just like employees, should not have to leave their particular religious or spiritual commitments behind when they enter the workplace. The permissibility of specific faith expression of formal leaders, like that of all employees, must also be determined in specific organizational contexts. Respectful pluralism, merely provides a framework in which formal and informal leaders in particular workplaces can establish formal structures and informal norms for negotiating, as constructively as possible, diverse commitments and values held by members of the workforce.

It may be helpful to return to the discussion of spirituality and leadership in a recent issue of *The Leadership Quarterly* in order to note connections to this article. In response to Bailey's (2001) and Harvey's (2001) constructive call to attend to religious particularity as well as general spirituality in organizational leadership, this essay has sought to recognize and address the increasing religious diversity—with the reality of conflict—in the contemporary workplace. There remains much work for scholars to examine the normative and descriptive resources in particular religious traditions for contributing to (and criticizing) the leadership process, the meaning of work, and so on. This author fully concurs with Bailey's assertion that religion and spirituality must be examined together and with Harvey's hard criticism of authors who refuse to acknowledge that most leaders (and followers, too) who discuss faith in practice do not use the abstract terms in Table 1 as often as they speak in particular religious language such as God, Allah, keeping Sabbath, celebrating Yom Kippur, and wearing *hijab*.

The analysis concurs with that of Hamilton and Schriesheim (2001) in criticizing “the oversimplification of spirit as the panacea for what ails current organizations” and in suggesting ways in which theories of leadership can take account of religious diversity. In response to Bowling's (2001) review, this analysis would call for focusing not on what “leading with Spirit” means in general terms, but for delineating how the specific religious

and spiritual commitments held by particular leaders and followers affect their actions and interactions in the workplace.

More work is needed in leadership studies to develop frameworks for negotiating the everyday expressions of spirituality and religion—and other kinds of potentially conflict-producing features of employee identity and diversity—in the workplace. With the exception of the unsustainable spirituality–religion opposition, there are currently few descriptive or normative criteria developed in the leadership literature to determine what spiritual or religious expressions are appropriate. By acknowledging the complexity and variety of faith expressions alongside other kinds of diversity as potential sources of both cooperation and conflict, leadership scholars will be better able to understand the role of religion and spirituality in organizational contexts.

Acknowledgments

An earlier version of this paper was delivered at the International Leadership Association annual meeting, Miami, FL, November 2, 2001. The author would like to thank participants at that meeting, and particularly Gill R. Hickman, for their constructive comments.

References

- Bailey, J. R. (2001). Book review of J.A. Conger & associates, *Spirit at work: discovering the spirituality in leadership*. *Leadership Quarterly*, 12, 367–368.
- Bailey, J. R., & Eastman, W. N. (1994). Positivism and the promise of the social sciences. *Theory and Psychology*, 4, 505–524.
- Barth, K. (1960). In T. F. Torrance, & G. W. Bromiley (Eds.), *Church dogmatics: the doctrine of creation, the creature*, vol. 3, part 3. Edinburgh: T.&T. Clark (J. K. S. Reid et al., Trans.).
- Bhindi, N., & Duignan, P. (1997). Leadership for a new century: authenticity, intentionality, spirituality and sensibility. *Educational Management and Administration*, 25, 117–132.
- Biberman, J., & Whitty, M. (1999). Editorial: twenty-first century spiritual paradigms/possibilities for organizational transformation. *Journal of Organizational Change Management*, 12, 174–180.
- Biberman, J., Whitty, M., & Robbins, L. (1999). Lessons from Oz: balance and wholeness in organizations. *Journal of Organizational Change Management*, 12, 243–254.
- Bowling, C. J. (2001). Book review of Harrison Owen, *The spirit of leadership: liberating the leader in each of us*. *Leadership Quarterly*, 12, 369–371.
- Burns, J. M. (1978). *Leadership*. New York: Harper & Row.
- Burns, J. M. (2002). Let the opposition speak. *Richmond Alumni Magazine*, 64, 26–27.
- Cacioppe, R. (2000). Creating spirit at work: re-visioning organization development and leadership—Part I. *Leadership and Organization Development Journal*, 21, 48–54.
- Calvin, J. (1961). *Institutes of the Christian religion*. In J. T. McNeill (Ed.). London: S.C.M. Press (F. L. Battles, Trans.).
- Carter, S. L. (1993). *The culture of disbelief: how American law and politics trivialize religious devotion*. New York: Basic Books.
- Cavanagh, G. F. (1999). Spirituality for managers: context and critique. *Journal of Organizational Change Management*, 12, 186–199.
- Conger, J. A. & associates (1994). *Spirit at work: discovering the spirituality in leadership*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.

- Covey, S. R. (1989). *The seven habits of highly effective people*. New York: Simon & Schuster.
- Covey, S. R., Merrill, A. R., & Merrill, R. R. (1994). *First things first*. New York: Simon & Schuster.
- Eck, D. L. (2001). *A new religious America*. San Francisco: Harper San Francisco.
- Fairholm, G. W. (1998). *Perspectives on leadership: from the science of management to its spiritual heart*. Westport, CT: Quorum.
- Fernandez, J. F., & Barr, M. (1993). *The diversity advantage: how American business can out-perform Japanese and European companies in the global marketplace*. New York: Lexington Books.
- Gray, B. (1989). *Collaborating: finding common ground for multiparty problems*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.
- Gutiérrez, G. (1973). *A theology of liberation: history, politics, and salvation*. Maryknoll, NY: Orbis (C. Inda & J. Eagleson, Trans.).
- Hamilton, B. A., & Schriesheim, C. A. (2001). Book review of Russ S. Moxley, *Leadership and spirit: breathing new vitality and energy into individuals and organizations*. *Leadership Quarterly*, 12, 373–375.
- Hardin, P. (1995). What's your sign?: companies use otherworldly assessment methods to choose the right employees. *Personnel Journal*, 74, 66–67.
- Harvey, J. B. (2001). Reflections on books by authors who apparently are terrified about really exploring spirituality and leadership. *Leadership Quarterly*, 12, 377–378.
- Heifetz, R. A. (1994). *Leadership without easy answers*. Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press.
- Hickman, G. R. (1998). Leadership and capacity building in organizations. In G. R. Hickman (Ed.), *Leading organizations: perspectives for a new era* (pp. 405–409). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Hickman, G. R., & Lee, D. S. (2001). *Managing human resources in the public sector: a shared responsibility*. Fort Worth: Harcourt College Publishers.
- Hoojiberg, R. (2001). Leadership and spirituality books. *Leadership Quarterly*, 12, 365.
- Konz, G. N. P., & Ryan, F. X. (1999). Maintaining an organizational spirituality: no easy task. *Journal of Organizational Change Management*, 12, 200–210.
- Laabs, J. J. (1995). Balancing spirituality and work. *Personnel Journal*, 74, 60–76.
- Milbank, J. (1990). *Theology and social theory: beyond secular reason*. Oxford: Blackwell.
- Milliman, J. F., Ferguson, J., Trickett, D., & Condemni, B. (1999). Spirit and community at Southwest Airlines: an investigation of a spiritual values-based model. *Journal of Organizational Change Management*, 12, 221–233.
- Mitroff, I. I., & Denton, E. A. (1999a). *A spiritual audit of corporate America: a hard look at spirituality, religion, and values in the workplace*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.
- Mitroff, I. I., & Denton, E. A. (1999b). A study of spirituality in the workplace. *Sloan Management Review*, 40, 83–92.
- Neal, J. A. (1997). Spirituality in management education: a guide to resources. *Journal of Management Education*, 21, 121–139.
- Niebuhr, H. R. (1941). *The meaning of revelation*. New York: Macmillan.
- Niebuhr, H. R. (1951). *Christ and culture*. New York: Harper & Row.
- Nussbaum, M. (1995). *Poetic justice: the literary imagination in public life*. Boston: Beacon Press.
- Rawls, J. (1971). *A theory of justice*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Robinson, G. D. (1988). Person-centered management. *Black Women of Achievement Magazine*, 1, 1.
- Roof, W. C. (1993). *A generation of seekers: the spiritual journey of the baby boom generation*. San Francisco: Harper San Francisco.
- Roof, W. C. (1999). *The spiritual marketplace: baby boomers and the remaking of American religion*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.
- Sandel, M. (1982). *Liberalism and the limits of justice*. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press.
- Schopf, J. (1997). Religious activity and proselytization in the workplace: the murky line between healthy expression and unlawful harassment. *Columbia Journal of Law and Social Problems*, 31, 39–59.
- Schleiermacher, F. (1996). *On religion: speeches to its cultured despisers*. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press (R. Crouter, Trans.).

- Thiemann, R. F. (1996). *Religion in public life: a dilemma for democracy*. Washington, DC: Georgetown University Press.
- Tillich, P. (1951). *Systematic theology, vol. 1*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Wolf, M., Friedman, B., & Sutherland, D. (1998). *Religion in the workplace: a comprehensive guide to legal rights and responsibilities*. Chicago: American Bar Association.
- Wuthnow, R. (1998). *After heaven: spirituality in America since the 1950s*. Berkeley: University of California Press.