

Virtuous Business

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We know that fully bringing your faith to work is not a given. We all know religious people who don't. They may feel like they have to check their faith at the door when they enter the workplace. Perhaps because they're afraid of offending, or afraid of being stigmatized. On the other hand, I know people for whom their faith seems to make absolutely no difference to their work.

There's a quote from the Second Vatican Council of the Catholic Church that addresses this. There are those who "think that religion consists in acts of worship alone and in the discharge of certain moral obligations, and who imagine they can plunge themselves into earthly affairs in such a way as to imply that these are altogether divorced from the religious life. **This split between the faith which many profess and their daily lives deserves to be counted among the more serious errors of our age**" (*Gaudium et Spes*, #43; emphasis added).

In a study of this phenomenon, sociologist Brandon Vaidyanathan conducted more than 200 in-depth interviews of highly religious Information Technology (IT) managers and reported the findings in his book *Mercenaries and Missionaries* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2019). The study focused on people who were highly active in their faith lives and their faith communities. As they described their faith, they said such things as "My self-worth comes from God," and "It is important to forgive those who have done great wrongs."

But these same people when asked about their work said such things as: "I'm just in it for the cash," or "I don't care anything about loyalty to the company," or "You may need to agree with what they ask you but you just need to do it to get the promotion." The research revealed a stark difference between who the participants were as religious people and who they were at work. Dr. Vaidyanathan found that an "apprehensive individualism" generated in global corporate workplaces is supported and sustained by a "therapeutic individualism" cultivated in evangelical-charismatic Catholicism (all the participants were Catholic). They applied their spirituality to their own motivation and meaning in life, but largely didn't connect that to their work.

I think this incongruity is a widespread phenomenon, not just confined to Catholics. The prime reason for this, I think, is the implicit assumption that being effective at work and being religious are at best irrelevant to each other, and at worst incompatible.

So, how can these two viewpoints be brought together? How can we live a unified life, a life of integrity – where our faith and our work are fully integrated? There is something we find very useful in teaching this at the Busch School of Business. It's the concept of virtue.

What are virtues? They are simply good habits. And the opposite of a virtue is a vice, a bad habit. It would be things like lying, cheating, stealing, gossiping. These are bad habits, vices. Being kind, being trustworthy – these are good habits, virtues. These virtues are ones that fit with our human nature, that make us and those around us happy. It makes sense: if you're in the habit of being good to others, then you'll tend to do the right thing, and do it fairly effortlessly, because it's a habit. So people will want to be your friend and work with you. You'll tend to be successful. Whereas vices do the opposite.

What is the connection of virtue to religion? The idea is that we are created by God, in His image. Being designed by God means there are certain behaviors that work for us as human beings. Virtue is one of those. When we act the way we are designed to act, then things tend to work better for us. People are happier, they're good to each other and communities flourish.

The fact that our religions teach us not to lie, cheat, steal or kill is not just because it's bad for others when we lie to them, steal from them or kill them. But it's also in a certain sense bad for us. When I lie to somebody, in some ways I do more damage to myself than to the person I lied to. The person I lied to or stole from typically gets some temporary disadvantage. But for me it made my character more like a liar or a thief. And that's ultimately more harmful to myself. The point of acting virtuously is that it's good for others and good for us as well.

The great thing about virtues is that they are habits — they can be cultivated and practiced. Anybody can grow in virtue. And this is contrary to how ethics is often viewed, where to be ethical means it must be difficult and costly. But virtue is the opposite. The more it is practiced, the easier it becomes. It becomes a habit. Think about it. The more you tell the truth, the easier it becomes to tell the truth, and the more uncomfortable it is to not tell the truth. The more you do good, the easier it becomes to do good.

You can see why this is good for business. Virtuous practice makes for better people, better relationships, better communities, and better business through their practice. The more virtuous people you have in your business, the stronger your business is likely to become.

There are four cardinal virtues around which many other virtues are organized (they are called "cardinal" virtues from the Latin word "cardo," which means hinge, or pivot: so these are the pivotal virtues). The first is **prudence**, the habit of making wise decisions *and* following through on them. It's consists of considering all the options, carefully weighing the evidence, making thoughtful decisions, and then acting. One who habitually does that becomes a prudent person.

Justice is the habit of being fair to others: giving to each his or her due, figuring out what each person deserves in a particular situation and making sure they get what's right. Thinking about whether someone ought to be promoted, for example, when done by someone practicing justice, will likely lead to a fair decision.

Third, **fortitude** or courage is the habit of doing the right thing even when you're afraid. It's not a question of feeling, but of practice. You can be terrified but still be a very courageous person and still do the right thing in a particular situation. And the more you do the right thing, the more courageous you become, and the easier it becomes to act courageously.

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And the fourth is **temperance**, the habit of resisting the temptation to do something wrong. It's resisting what's bad for you and/or bad for others. Not eating to excess, not lashing out at others when you're angry, and so forth.

My proposal is that living and practicing the virtues is a way for religious people to live out their faith at work. It gives us a structure and a practice for living as people of faith in a work environment, a way to bring our whole faithful self to work.

This essay is based on a keynote speech given by Dean Andrew Abela at the first national conference for faith-oriented employee resource groups (ERGs), co-hosted by the Religious Freedom & Business Foundation and the Busch School of Business at The Catholic University of America in Washington, DC. For more about virtue in business, see www.VirtuousAdministration.org