

Freedom: For Profit and Prophet

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In 1492, Ferdinand and Isabella, CEO’s of a prominent, global conglomerate called *Spain*, issued an executive order. They decided that Jews and Muslims, indeed, anyone different from their corporate culture, could no longer express their religion in the workplace.

Since, if you were Spanish, Spain was the only company you could work for back then, there was no choice: you had to change your religion and buy into the dominant culture of the workplace or look for a job elsewhere. You would be fired, *terminated*.

Torquemada, the Grand Inquisitor, is not the CEO of most companies in the U.S., but the point I wish to make, somewhat humorously so we balance the pain, is that millions of people go to work in America in a basic “Anglo-Protestant-style” secular environment, hiding who they are. And while no one has formally distributed an inter-office memo requiring them to imitate the culture of the company, there is an implied, coercive pressure. There is truly a cultural norm at work, reinforced by an underlying threat of firing, pay-check loss, and suffering to oneself and one’s family. There is a pressure to blend in, fold in, and lose the uniqueness of your own culture, the specialness of your own religion, just to stay fed, clothed, sheltered, i.e. to remain alive.

The economic effects of Spain’s corporate policy were devastating, rippling throughout the centuries. The vibrancy of Muslim and Jewish life was stripped from the Inner Self of Spain. The loss of diversity, the loss of vitality, led to the stifling of independent thought and scientific research. Innovation slowed. Foreign competitors, with greater supplies of both intellectual and economic capital, became strengthened, emboldened, threatening the market share of Spain.

Fortunately, God always opens a window when a door is closed. That very same year, a new continent would be discovered. No, Columbus, it wasn’t India, with apologies to the natives upon it. After their unique talents were farmed and exploited for survival-necessities, they too were culturally dominated, forced into the workplace with their religion marginalized, ignored or destroyed.

No, this new land would have a different destiny. It would become America! It would be the locus of a truly *New World*. In this new world, excessive authoritarian excesses due to a lethal fusion of governmental and religious power would be toppled. A new kind of nation would be conceived that was based upon FREEDOM, including *religious freedom*.

As we all know, the promise of this kind of freedom produces remarkable economic results. It still does.

However, there remains is a serious philosophical problem in American business. Having arisen, as a psychological “reaction formation”, away from the extremes of “God-fearing” religious authority past, many businesses have gone to a secular extreme. They have become spiritually empty, even conscienceless. The noble, God-granted, right to profit in a correct, Creational context – healthy, whole, humane –

has become ignoble. Profit has – sadly, ignorantly, excessively, dangerously – become *human purpose itself*. Profit has become God.

So, not surprisingly, in a salvific economy-of-thought, which still orders our world, their competitor is rising. Equally sad, ignorant, excessive, dangerous – the rise of radical “American democratic” socialism.

Both extremes are poison. Our economies need to combine the wisdom contained in both these extremes and go beyond either to become fully human.

The word *economy* comes from the original Greek, *oikumene*, meaning *household*. We need to realize that an economy is not a blind machine where we pump in the numbers and it spits out happiness. An economy is a living, breathing *household*. Treat your household well, treat your family members and employees well, and your economy will grow and prosper; it will demonstrate *more Good*, a greater experience of “God.” This is a basic prophetic truth, common to all the world’s great and noble faiths.

That’s why there is no better way, no faster way to accomplish the healing of our economy than to expand our business model to be open to and inclusive of diverse religious groups and illumined spiritual practices in the workplace. Let us follow the prophetic lead of the *Religious Freedom & Business Foundation (RFBF)*, under the inspired guidance of Dr. Brian Grim.

This is something I’m especially passionate about. Before I became a rabbi, helping to heal inter-religious relations, I was, believe it or not, a “Mad Man.” I created some of the biggest campaigns in the world; I wrote *Gillette. The Best A Man Can Get*, still running in over 120 countries. The experience was an existential nightmare for me. It made me question the very meaning of business, the very purpose of profit, and the human value of conditioning people to buy things. Finding a way for business to serve God, and for God’s Presence to enter business, became my personal search. I’m devoted to RFBF, because it’s a “campaign” that can heal, on so many levels.

It is just at this very point – when core American business is becoming cement, machine-like, rigidly dogmatic in its drive to expand profit – it is precisely NOW that it also needs to balance itself with spiritual wisdom, allowing different religious viewpoints, different spiritual voices, and divergent philosophical thinking into its *Holy of Holies*. It is right now – when American capitalism is beginning to take on smell of a world-cult, when there is dangerous fusion of politics, business, and rigid ideologies – that we need to heed the lessons of religious history.

The sharing of spiritual perspectives, the sharing of different religious perspectives and enthusiasms, as part of the living economy of ideas in the workplace, will give American business a fast, life-saving infusion of conscience. However, and critically important, this can be accomplished in a way that is not exclusivist, authoritarian or exceptionalist. It will not, ironically, repeat the religious errors of the past, which only helped make “secular-ism” the default “religion” of today’s world.

The infusion of Christian, Muslim, Buddhist, Hindu, Humanist and other viewpoints, shared joyfully together within the workplace, can invigorate the spirit of business. Businesses will become living social experiments in how world democracy should function. Businesses will actually fulfill their potential as *teaching institutions*, helping to educate whole populations on the critical values needed to produce happy, healthy, productive, and prosperous lives.

Healthy religious freedom expressed through healthy business will enliven what some call “the power of Spirit” – *economic force*! It’s this which will put the American economic system back on a solid, spiritual ground. It’s this which will make us again a model for the World. It’s this which will also result in the cleaning of our national debt, resulting from the reaping of greed, corruption and waste, that was previously sown: *Forgive us our debts, as we forgive the debts of others?* Sound economic advice!

Religious people, as fully-accepted, faith-full contributors to business – working together to empower the Common Good – will, finally, demonstrate to the World how different faiths should “get along.” Not just tolerating each other, not just singing *kumbaya*, but *truly* getting along. How to harness their religious zeal, cooperatively? How to create an ethical masterpiece of omni-religious entrepreneurship? We’re already beginning to see this in American Airlines, Walmart, Tyson Foods, and many other noteworthy household brands.

Now, to a religious person like me, Freedom is simply God: *Unlimited, Unrestricted, Unbounded, Except by Its Own Self*. This is the same God that released some Hebrew workers stuck in a bad employment contract from a CEO named Pharaoh some 3,500 years ago.

To a non-religious person, freedom is just something “practical.” After all, freedom is just a basic “Design Parameter” built into the very Nature of Reality, like light and dark. Freedom is the living fact – easily observable by anyone – that no matter what happens, there is always something next. Something next! Something new! Something to learn! Something to expand upon, to put into motion. Something visionary and exciting. The past does not define us!

Whether we frame freedom in theological or in practical terms, this should not confuse us. Freedom is the inspiration for us both: freedom is the shared faith of religion and business.

In a spirit of freedom, we seek “new and improved” quality for human life. In a spirit of freedom, we share our talents, our muses, our inspirations, and we innovate. In a spirit of freedom, we join in service – to each other and to all Life and Creation. In a spirit of freedom, we expand upon the raw materials already in Creation, adding our ideas and labor, so we *profit*: we get more out, because we put more in. In a spirit of freedom, we must *always* and *relentlessly* reach beyond provincial markets. We must always maximize distribution. We must always bring Goodness and more Goodness to more and more people: More peace. More justice. More prosperity (including lots of money!) for all humankind.

So, one day, as the prophet Isaiah (6:3) envisions it: *The whole earth is filled with Your Glory*.

Sounds like a plan.

Whether profit motivated, or prophet motivated, business and religion both share the same faith in FREEDOM.

Welcome to a newer, New World, built upon a better foundation: *Religious Freedom and Business*, working together!