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'Visionaries … psychiatric wards are full of them': Religious terms in management literature

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Contemporary management literature often makes use of strong religious vocabulary. This article will provide a critical analysis of this practice. It especially analyses the usage of three religious terms in management circles: 'vision' – a term omnipresent in leadership literature, 'metanoic organisations' – a notion found in books about change management, and 'evangelists' – a job title mentioned in job advertisements by companies such as Apple and Microsoft. This phenomenon goes hand in hand with the megatrend 'workplace spirituality', which started in the 1990s. In addition, it can be observed that religious vocabulary has found its way into ordinary current management literature, even if this literature does not show any overt link to spirituality. The article lists some negative side effects of this use, such as confusion of terms, manipulation of people and inappropriate pathos.

Intradisciplinary and/or interdisciplinary implications: It is important for both Theology and Management Theory to be critical of the use of religious terms in non-religious contexts.

Introduction[1]

A short dialogue in the latest James Bond movie, *Spectre* (2015), illustrates the ambiguity of the word 'vision':

> The bad guy Oberholzer/Blofield says about his copartner C: 'He's a visionary, like me'.
> James Bond replies: 'Visionaries … psychiatric wards are full of them'. (n.p.)

Blofield uses the word 'visionary' as it is used in contemporary management literature, whereas in Bond's answer it refers to a lunatic. The original meaning of vision is different from both: 'Vision' used to be a divine or spiritual revelation (Hoheisel 2005:1127).

This article is focused on the use of religious or spiritual vocabulary in contemporary management literature. It provides a critical analysis of this practice. I decided to study the use of three terms: 'vision', 'metanoic organisation' and 'evangelist'. The choice of these three terms is admittedly arbitrary. The term 'vision' is the most obvious one because it is one of the most popular terms in management circles. Because of its popularity, there are already some critical reviews on this term, for example Shipley (2000). To my knowledge, the use of the other two terms has not yet been investigated in academic journals, probably because they are less popular. The term 'metanoic organisation' is worth analysing because it still has a very strong religious connotation. It was introduced at the same time as 'vision' but did not take root at all. The third expression, 'evangelists', is limited to the world of information technology (IT). I will start with the neglected one, 'metanoic organisation'.

Of course, other examples are also worth studying. For example, Alvesson (2011) critically evaluated the metaphor 'leaders as saints' in secular leadership theory, and Ruth (2014) criticised the metaphor 'leaders as priests'.

The use of religious terms in management parlance is not without intention. Partly, it has to do with the megatrend 'workplace spirituality'. Therefore, this article will start with a short review of this megatrend. The main section of this article is on the use of the three above-mentioned religious terms. After this, I will offer possible explanations for the use of religious vocabulary in management literature. The final section points out possible toxic side effects of this practice.

Although I can see some benefits in workplace spirituality, this article is more on the 'dark side of workplace spirituality' (Lips-Wiersma, Dean & Fornaciari 2009).

I wrote this article from the perspective of a German Protestant theologian who worked for 12 years in the business world before moving on to theology. Thus, I experienced first-hand the different methods chief executive officers (CEOs) use to 'motivate' their staff.

The megatrend spirituality@work

'Spirituality at work' (in symbols: spirituality@work or God@work) has become a megatrend, which started in the USA in the 1990s (Tourish 2013:59); see, for example the bibliography in Giacalone and Jurkiewicz ([2003] 2015: 21–26). Many authors of popular books or academic articles are trying to bring spirituality into the field of management. They claim that doing so will cause the commitment of employees to grow and the organisation to prosper as a result.

An early such publication was McKnight's book chapter 'Spirituality in the workplace', first published in 1984. There McKnight ([1984] 2005:165) defined spirituality as 'an animating life force, an energy that inspires one toward certain ends or purposes that go beyond self'. Conger's book *Spirit at Work* (1994) was one of the first popular books on workplace spirituality. Mitroff and Denton's book *A Spiritual Audit of Corporate America* was probably the first academic contribution in this field. The famous leadership expert Warren Bennis (in Mitroff & Denton 1999:xii) summarised the message of their book: 'The heart of their argument … goes like this: Individuals and organizations that perceive themselves as "more spiritual" do better. They are more productive, creative, and adaptive'.

Many people draw a sharp line between 'spirituality' and 'religion'. So do the respondents to whom Mitroff and Denton (1999:xiv) referred, as follows: 'They viewed religion as highly inappropriate … in the workplace. Conversely, spirituality was viewed as highly appropriate'. In differentiating between spirituality and religion, the respondents put the ugly attributes into the box 'religion' (formal, organised, dogmatic, intolerant, etc.) and the more positive attributes into the box 'spirituality' (informal, personal, broadly inclusive, tolerant, etc.).[2]

In 2000, the internet bookseller Amazon set up a subsection of books devoted to *Spirituality and Religion in the Workplace* (Fernando 2005:1). The topic also received intense academic attention. In addition to many articles in peer-reviewed journals, some academic journals (outside of theology) published special issues on this topic. For example, *Organization* had a special issue *Spirituality, Management and Organization* (Calás & Smircich 2003:327) and *The Leadership Quarterly* put out a special issue *Toward a Paradigm of Spiritual*

Leadership (Fry 2005:619).[3] Academic interest in this topic increased so much that in 2004 a separate journal, *Journal of Management, Spirituality & Religion*, was launched. Since then, it has published some 200 articles (Taylor & Francis 2016). In 2003, Giacalone and Jurkiewicz (2015) provided the first handbook on workplace spirituality (second edition published in 2010 and republished 2015). Neal (2013) published a thick handbook of 767 pages. Various conferences have dealt with this topic, for example a secular conference held in Hungary in 2001 (Zsolnai 2011) and a theological conference held in Belgium (Nullens & Barentsen 2014).

The majority of the contributions to this topic are from the USA (Case & Gosling 2010:260). Thus, the early publications on workplace spirituality were very much influenced by the Protestant Christian worldview, even if the authors were open to other spiritual inputs.

Evangelical approaches in this area can be categorised under the title 'Christ@work'. Some companies call themselves 'kingdom companies' (Kingdom Companies 2016). Book titles like *Transforming Your Workplace for Christ* (Nix 1997) and *Transformation: Change the Marketplace and You Change the World* (Silvoso 2007) describe the intention of the authors. A German example is *Jesus auf der Chefetage* [Jesus on the executive level] (Knoblauch & Opprecht 2003). In China, several Christian entrepreneurs adopted the concept of kingdom companies.

The authors Mitroff and Denton (1999) distance themselves from a single-faith approach:

> we want to make as clear as possible at the outset that the acknowledgement of spirituality in corporate America is not synonymous with compelling workers to accept an official company religion or forcing them to accept one of the world's major religions. (p. 8)

They regard religion-based organisations with the mission statement 'taking over your company for Christ' as the extreme form, not being representative of workplace spirituality (Mitroff & Denton 1999:57–75).

The different handbooks and conference proceedings describe influences from other world religions and from secular spirituality. For example, the Buddhist virtue 'mindfulness' is quite popular in contemporary management circles. The Hindu religion also seems to be quite well represented (see, e.g., the articles in Zsolnai [2011] or the discussion on Vedanta in Pandey and Gupta [2008]). Hicks (2003) offers a framework for coping with the diversity of employees' spirituality so that no religion or spirituality can dominate the others.

Recent empirical findings support the demand for more spirituality at work. For example, the South African scholars Van der Walt and De Klerk (2014) conducted a survey on 'Workshop spirituality and job satisfaction', involving 600 white-collar workers from South Africa. Their conclusion is

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2.I want to mention here that I do not agree with this distinction, as the categories are defined superficially, and in practice it is hard to distinguish clearly between spirituality and religion.

3.More examples can be found in Case and Gosling (2010:257) and Pandey and Gupta (2008:66).

as follows: 'To survive in the 21st century, organizations need to be spiritually based' (Van der Walt & De Klerk 2014:379). The Baltic scholars Kumpikaite-Valiuniene and Alas (2014) conducted interviews with 79 respondents from Lithuania. Of the respondents, 86.67% agreed or even strongly agreed with the statement that Christian values should also be involved in work activities (which could be a counter-reaction to the suppression of religious life in the former Soviet Union).

On the other hand, there are also a lot of critical voices about workplace spirituality, see the last section of this article.

Three religious terms used in management literature

Workplace spirituality is an attempt deliberately to bring spirituality into the workplace. However, spiritual or religious vocabulary is also used in management books that have no overt link to spirituality. It might be assumed that those who introduce a religious term into management do so by intention. From linguistics, we know that once a term is established in a new context, the term might receive a second meaning different from the original one.

The critical analysis of the three terms is carried out by addressing the following questions:

• When and by whom was this term introduced into management literature?
• How do they define this term in the management context?
• What was its original religious meaning?
• Did those who introduced this term into management context make an explicit link to spirituality or religion?
• How popular is the term now in management literature?

Metanoic organisations

The term 'metanoic organisations' was invented by Charles Kiefer and Peter Senge (1981) at a conference. One year later, they published an article on this topic (Kiefer & Senge [1982] 1999), which they developed further in a book chapter (Kiefer & Senge [1984] 2005). The article and the book were reprinted decades later, which underscores their popularity.

Kiefer and Senge (1999:26, 2005:90) introduced the Greek word *metanoia* with the explanation 'meaning a fundamental shift of mind', and added the following information: 'This term was used by early Christians to describe the reawakening of intuition and vision'.[4]

From a theological point of view, this interpretation looks like a 'soft version' of the original meaning. According to Goetzmann (1990:72), the word *metanoia* was hardly used in classic Greek; thus, the major source is the New Testament. In the New Testament, the word *metanoia* always refers to a total conversion combined with repentance. It is, for example, used in the passages on John the Baptist, who prepared the

way for Christ by proclaiming 'a baptism of repentance (*metanoia*)' (Mk 1:4, Lk 3:3), or in the imperative: 'Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand' (Mt 3:2, ESV). *Metanoia* means a turnaround, that is, a U-turn in life, starting with the insight that one has gone the wrong way. Note that the aspect of repentance is not covered by Kiefer and Senge's definition 'reawakening of intuition and vision'.[5]

Kiefer and Senge (1981:3) apply the 'term previously employed to describe an individual shift in viewpoint to describe this new type of organization'. 'We use the term "metanoic organization" to describe a unifying principle underlying a broad base of contemporary organizational innovations' (Kiefer & Senge 1999:26, 2005:90):

> In metanoic organizations, these beliefs form a coherent organizational philosophy with five primary dimensions: 1) a deep sense of vision or purposefulness, 2) alignment around this vision, 3) empowering people, 4) structural integrity and 5) the balance of reason and intuition. (Kiefer & Senge 2005:90)

With the word 'vision', Kiefer and Senge introduce another term from spirituality. They declare that the purpose of their work is to add a spiritual dimension:

> That people are basically good and want to contribute is well known as the 'Theory Y' view of management, to which the metanoic viewpoint adds a still more spiritual, visionary dimension. (Kiefer & Senge 1999:30, 2005:97)

It would be an asset 'to share the spiritual benefits of our success with all people in the organization' (Kiefer & Senge 1999:30, 2005:97).

Thus, it can be taken for granted that Kiefer and Senge introduced spiritual vocabulary intentionally.

The term 'metanoic organisations' did however not take root (Van den Brink 2004:14). Aside from the fact that Kiefer and Senge themselves used the expression in later publications, it is hardly referenced by other authors. Some exceptions are Pinedo (2004:129), who note that 'only metanoic organizations will survive'; the anthroposophical writer Margarete van den Brink (2004:154), who integrated the term into her model; and the consulting company Sustainable Systems (2016). In 1998, Kiefer and Senge commented on the use of terms they had already used in 1981:

> How widely have some of these ideas spread! Vision, alignment, empowering people, systems thinking, and more decentralized designs permeate contemporary management thought. None of this means, however, that the notion of metanoia, a fundamental movement of mind, is either well understood or widely embodied in today's organizations. … Everywhere today, people speak of 'vision'. (Kiefer & Senge 2005:87)

The word 'vision' has thus been established in management, but not the word *metanoia*.

4.In Kiefer and Senge (1981:3), they wrote 'reawakening of intuition and personal vision'.

5.It is interesting to note that the 1981 abstract contains an explanation which is closer to the New Testament meaning. There Kiefer and Senge refer to 'New Testament writers' who used this term to describe 'an immense new inward movement for obtaining one's rule of life … a change of the inner man' (abstract, p. 1, the quote is from a source not provided in their text, probably a theological book). From a theological perspective, it is a pity that they omitted this explanation in later publications.

Vision

The word 'vision' is one of the most popular management terms today. One could even dare to say it is almost omnipresent in current management talk. Many ask for 'visionary leadership' (see, for example, *Visionary Leadership* [Nanus 1992] or *Visionäre Unternehmensführung* [Menzenbach 2012]). According to Kiefer and Senge (1981:9), this was not the case in 1981: 'In the past, the notion of a vision for an organization has not been common to management parlance'.

Shipley (2000) conducted an extensive study of the origin of vision and visioning in planning. He also states that 'talk of vision became wide-spread after' the mid-1980s (Shipley 2000:225).[6] The idea of vision was popularised by the management bestseller *Leaders* by Bennis and Nanus (1985). These two authors interviewed 90 managers and deduced four key strategies for successful leadership (Bennis & Nanus 1985:28).[7] According to Bennis and Nanus, the first key strategy is 'attention through vision' (Bennis & Nanus 1985:87). Leaders should have a clear vision of the future state of their organisation, and this has to be an attractive and realistic image. Two years later, Kouzes and Posner published their leadership model (Northouse 2016:174). After interviewing 1300 managers, they developed a model consisting of five fundamental practices that enable leaders to get extraordinary things done. One of these five practices is 'Inspire a shared vision' (Northouse 2016:174). Nowadays, 'vision' has become one of the key words in leadership books. Leaders must be visionary! In this context, 'vision always deals with the future. Indeed, vision is where tomorrow begins' (Nanus 1992:8).

Of course, there are also management thinkers who criticise the concept of 'vision' in management literature. Fredmund Malik, considered as one of the most influential management thinkers in the German-speaking countries, regards 'vision' as one of many popular but dangerous management words which should be avoided (Malik 2005:41–44). He argues that many business debacles occurred because of the epidemic spread of the term 'vision'. Start-ups went bankrupt because they had nothing to offer – apart from their 'vision' (Malik 2005:41). Daydreams are now called 'visions' and they collapse like a house of cards.[8] Blessin and Wick (2014) wrote a polemic article against visionary leadership.

In most cases where the word 'vision' pops up in modern management, the link to spirituality is lost. However Bennis and Nanus (1985:92) saw a clear link to spirituality: 'by focusing attention on a vision, the leader operates on the *emotional and spiritual resources* of the organization'.[9]

6. Although it has to be noted that Peter F. Drucker, one of the greatest management thinkers of the 20th century, wrote about 'the Managerial Vision' as early as 1954 (Drucker [1954] 1993:307–309), a book not listed in Shipley's study.

7. This book also helped to popularise Burns's concept of transforming leadership (Burns 1978). Bennis and Nanus (1985:17) explicitly pay tribute to his concept and 'his contributions to our work'.

8. 'Unter dem hochtrabenden Begriff der "Vision" sind durchweg nur Luftschlösser und Kartenhäuser entstanden, die beim geringsten wirtschaftlichen "Wind" zusammengebrochen sind' (Malik 2005:42).

9. Conger (1994:xv) used this quote as evidence for his statement that there was already workplace spirituality.

In the past, 'vision' was a term strongly connected to religion and spirituality. Visions were important in many ancient religions, usually mediated by prophets, seers and shamans (Hoheisel 2005:1127). For example, visions are mentioned in the Bible and in Plato's writings. Visions in their religious use mean divine or at least spiritual revelations, for example messages from God. They sometimes refer to the future and sometimes not. In the Bible, we find examples of both types. Nehemia's vision of a new wall around Jerusalem referred to a future state (Neh 2:12, 2:17, 2:18), but Peter's vision on the roof was just a divine teaching lesson for him (Ac 10:9–17a). A vision was considered true if it came from God (Yahweh). People knew about false visions proclaimed by false prophets (e.g. Lamentations 2:14, Ezekiel 13:9, 22:28).

To understand the shift of meaning of the word 'vision', let us have a look at the famous mystic Hildegard von Bingen (1098–1179), a German Benedictine abbess. She wrote down her visions in three volumes, the first one titled *Scivias* ('Know the ways'). In the foreword, she justifies her writings as having been commanded by God. Her visions do not refer to a future state (unlike 'vision' in management literature). They provide additional spiritual insights about heaven, the cosmos, et cetera. In the Middle Ages, women were not allowed to participate in theological discussions. Receiving visions gave Hildegard the legitimation she needed to be heard by the church authorities. (This has an interesting parallel today: Especially in free churches leaders require visions in order to be accepted as a leader!)

With the rise of secularisation, visions were cast in a negative light. People would regard a person who had visions as an insane person, a lunatic. Neuberger (2002:205) points out the irony that every manager nowadays is expected to have a vision, while this used to be seen as a sign of craziness or disconnection from reality, something far from the idea of a gifted leader. Public opinion changes quickly! In 1980, German chancellor Helmut Schmidt publicly stated during the election campaign that 'whoever has visions should see the doctor' (translated from Schmidt 2009)[10] – and he was re-elected nonetheless. Today, if a leader is not able to formulate a vision for the organisation, his ability to lead is questioned. No vision, no job.

Today, we face three different meanings of the term 'vision'[11]:

1. Spirituality, religion: Divine revelation.
2. Psychology: Sign of illness, madness.
3. Management literature: Description of a future state.

Radical atheists might argue that (1) can be regarded as a special case of (2). This triple meaning of the word 'vision' sometimes leads to confusion (or to a play on words, as in the James Bond movie quoted in the beginning).

10. 'Wer Visionen hat, soll zum Arzt gehen' (Schmidt 2009).

11. The ambivalence of the term 'vision' was already discussed by Shipley (2000): 'The kind of vision implied in reference to a biblical prophet and the sense in which as 19th century writer can be said to be visionary, are very different from one another and different again from the way the terms are used today' (p. 234).

It is interesting to trace the re-entry of the term 'vision' into church vocabulary. Church leadership, a subdiscipline of Practical Theology, is naturally influenced by management sciences. Thus, the word 'vision', originally church language, then adopted by management theory, re-entered the church vocabulary.[12] One exponent of church leadership is the Willow Creek Association with their leadership conferences worldwide. Bill Hybels, their well-known leader, in his book *Courageous Leadership* gives vision first place on the list of characteristics leaders should have: 'A leader's most potent weapon: the power of vision' (Hybels 2002:29). The Briton John Stott, considered to be one of the most important theologians of the evangelical movement in the 20th century, lists five important features of an empowered leader, of which the first one is 'Vision!' (Stott 1999:421–435). Andy Stanley, another well-known pastor in the USA, even created a tool for developing a vision, *Visioneering* (Stanley 1999), meaning 'engineering of a vision'. The German theologians Böhlemann and Herbst (2011:31–36) also emphasised the importance of vision for church leadership.[13]

The problem is the following: people use the word 'vision' in the church context, but it is not clear in which sense they use it. Do they refer to a vision in the biblical sense of a divine revelation (1), or to the type of vision described in management literature (3)? This confusion may be illustrated by a vision agreed upon by the covenant churches in Germany (Bund Freier evangelischer Gemeinden) to which I belong. In 2005, their national church government postulated the 'Vision 100 in 10' (Freie evangelische Gemeinden 2016). It set the ambitious goal of planting 100 new congregations in 10 years. Ten years later, in 2015, 69 new congregations had been planted. That might be considered a good number, but the goal of 100 was not met. When this result was discussed in articles and letters from readers, it became clear that from the very beginning there was a confusion of terms. Some people understood the word 'vision' as used in management literature (as stated by Spincke, quoted in Rützenhoff 2016:17), whereas others linked it more to the meaning of a divine revealed order.

The confusion of terms becomes obvious when advocates for visionary church leadership refer to Proverbs 29:18 in the King James Version: 'Where there is no vision, the people perish'. They use the term 'vision' as in management theory (3), but by quoting the Bible they create the impression that this vision also has the status of a divine revelation (1). Twenty-five years ago, my wife and I were members of a church congregation whose church building was in a very small Bavarian village consisting of four houses in total. In 1992, the pastor postulated a new vision for the church: we should become a megachurch! Some members were quite critical of this vision, but the pastor justified this vision with

Proverbs 29:18.[14] Shipley (2000:227) even lists some examples where people used this verse for projects outside the church context.

Stott (1999:422) and Hybels (2002:31) both refer to Proverbs 29:18 when they discuss the importance of vision. As Stott (1999:477) rightly admits, Proverbs 29:28 actually means 'divine revelation', and not vision in the sense used by management literature:

> What the biblical writer is saying is that unless we have a 'word from God' … people become restless and tend to do what their sinful nature suggests to them. (Pohlman 2011:121)

The South African Pohlman (p. 120) 'heard motivational speakers suggesting repeatedly that this verse is referring to the importance of creating a "Vision Statement" for an organization'. My experiences in the German context are similar. Some speakers seem to translate Proverbs 29:18 as follows: 'Where there is no vision statement, the church will perish'. This usage is based on a confusion of terms and is actually an abuse of the Bible.

Evangelists

'Technology evangelism is a relatively recent phenomenon' (Lucas-Conwell 2006:7), and it is used in the IT sector only (Illg 2010). The book *Selling the Dream* written by the former Apple Chief Evangelist Guy Kawasaki (1991) made 'secular evangelism' popular in the context of marketing. According to Kawasaki (1991:6), the term 'software evangelist' was coined in 1983 by Mike Murray, the Macintosh division director of marketing, and Mike Boich became the first 'software evangelist'. Kawasaki's book is structured around the term 'evangelism': 'An Introduction to Evangelism' (Kawasaki 1991:1–44), 'Becoming an Evangelist' (Kawasaki 1991:45–108), 'The Stages of Evangelism' (Kawasaki 1991:109–150), 'The Advanced Techniques of Evangelism' (Kawasaki 1991:151–184) and the concluding part is about 'Evangelizing the Opposite Sex' (Kawasaki 1991:187–194) and 'The Ethical Evangelist' (Kawasaki 1991:195–200).

Kawasaki (1991:4) provides a clear definition: 'Evangelism is the process of selling a dream', and immediately connects it with another religious term, 'vision': 'Selling a dream means transforming a vision – that is, an insight, that is not yet perceptible to most people'.

Kawasaki did not invent the term 'evangelism' in the context of management, but he considers himself a '"midwife" of evangelism' (Kawasaki 1991:ix). Of course, Kawasaki is aware of the religious connotation of this word. His message is 'that to make products, companies, and ideas successful' you must get 'people to believe in your product, company, or idea' (Kawasaki 1991:vii). The reason why Kawasaki promotes this religious term is the 'passion of evangelism' (Kawasaki 1991:4). In a footnote, Kawasaki (Kawasaki 1991:3) distances himself from television

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12.The following subsection is a short summary from Kessler (2013:5).

13.Interestingly, Böhlemann and Herbst (2011:224) connected 'vision' with the apostolic type of leader (Type C) and not to the prophetic type of leader (Type B). In the Old Testament, visions were received by prophets. Thus, Böhlemann and Herbst probably refer more to the strategic component of 'vision', which is the use in modern management theory.

14.Actually, in this case, the vision collapsed like a house of cards as Malik (2005:42) had put it.

evangelists, but he likes their enthusiasm: 'Evangelism … means selling your dream by using fervor, zeal, guts and cunning' (Kawasaki 1991:3).

The term 'evangelism', literally meaning 'spreading good news', has its origin in the Greek New Testament (Becker 1990). The word 'evangelists' occurs three times in the New Testament (Acts 21:8, Eph 4:11, 2 Tim 4, 5) (Becker 1990:301). It refers to a person who proclaims the gospel of Jesus Christ.

It is this pathos that attracted Kawasaki. In the first paragraph of his book, he states: '(This book) is for flames, not embers. … It shows you how to change the world' (Kawasaki 1991:vii). The goal is clear: To change the whole world! A less ambitious goal is not acceptable.

One has to admit that the company Apple indeed has changed the world. This is even more true today than 25 years ago when Kawasaki (Kawasaki 1991:9) wrote: 'Macintosh's success signalled the acceptance of secular evangelism as a technique to effect change'.[15]

Although the term 'technology evangelist' became quite popular in North America, it took some time for it to be adopted in Germany.[16] I first learned about it when I visited the computer exhibition *CeBIT 2013* in Hannover, Germany, and a lady from Microsoft gave me her business card with the job title 'Evangelist'. Today, a Google search for 'technology evangelists' leads to many job advertisements in the USA, Germany and other countries. Lucas-Conwill (2006) did an interesting study on the qualities of technology evangelists. An evangelist in this sense promotes a special product or a special method, like Ken Schwaber who calls himself a 'Scrum evangelist' (Pichler 2008:vii). (Scrum denotes a certain kind of project management.)

Why do management people use spiritual vocabulary?

How do we interpret these findings? Why do secular management authors make use of religious vocabulary, whether intentionally or not? Apart from the fact that some religious terms were intentionally introduced in the context of the trend 'workplace spirituality', there are two additional major explanations:

(1) *Because of history*: The British theologian Stephen Pattison in his book *The Faith of the Managers* provides a plausible historical explanation for the frequent use of spiritual language in management. His main claim is that 'management is a kind of religion' (Pattison 1997:5) and that 'modern management has many of the characteristics and assumptions of a radical Christian sect' (Pattison 1997:2). Although management theory presents itself as hard science, relying only on facts, 'it is full of metaphysical beliefs and

assumptions' (Pattison 1997:26).[17] According to Pattison (1997:39), the vocabulary resembles that of evangelical revivalism. Pattison explains this with the history of management science: 'The modern disciplines of management emerged in North America' (Pattison 1997:47) and the USA is very much influenced by Protestantism. Indeed, some US management authors see their leadership model as contrasting with the organisational thinking of the Catholic Church (e.g. Kiefer & Senge 2005:99). Unlike the European churches, no religious denomination in the USA has had an official link to the state. Various religious groups had to compete with each other to attract new members, thereby establishing a marketplace of faith.[18] Religion had to be sold – and thus religious activity was seen as a good preparation for business (Pattison 1997:48):

> The modern management guru seems to imitate his nineteenth century forebears in almost every detail – even down to providing the souvenirs and follow up materials that Moody and Sankey sold to their enthusiastic audiences. (p. 49)

For European academics such as Pattison (UK) and Neuberger (Germany), the religious language in management is quite irritating. Neuberger (2002:196–197) mocks the religious language in writings about charismatic and transforming leadership.

(2) *For motivation and persuasion*: It can be noted that spiritual or religious language is especially used where the intention is to motivate people, either to make a change (in the case of 'vision' and 'metanoic organisations') or to buy a product (in the case of 'evangelists'). As mentioned above, Kawasaki (1991:4) was especially attracted by the 'passion of evangelism'.

Spiritual or religious language is mostly used in the context of change management, less for everyday management. Human beings often resist change, especially if the change is forced on them. In big organisations, it is often very hard to implement changes because of their well-implemented routines. If their CEOs want a drastic change, they require drastic words, such as 'metanoia' and 'our moon mission' (Gerstner in Mustermann 2010:69). Speakers want to touch the staff members deeply, and therefore they use spiritual language. 'Despite living in a secular society, religiously derived metaphors continue to be powerful' (Pattison 1997:72).

A typical motivational speech in change contexts consists of three parts: (1) describing the vision – the goal, (2) explaining the way to the goal and (3) the doom scenario: what will happen if the desired action is not taken? Sometimes, the doom scenarios resemble apocalyptic scenarios from early Christianity (Pattison 1997:39).

A recent example of this communication strategy can be found in a *Managermagazin* report on the German car

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15. In that context, Kawasaki (p. 5) speaks about 'the Macintosh crusade', thereby using another term which is inherited from a religious background.

16. See Illg (2010). The English Wikipedia article on 'technology evangelist' was created in 2005; the German one was created in 2008.

17. One of these beliefs is 'the ritual search for the new "supermanager," … the new Messiah' (Chater 1999:68).

18. In Germany, for example, we also had different churches, Catholic and Protestant, but for many centuries the rule from 1555 held: Cuius regio, eius religio ['whose realm, his religion']. People did not have to choose their religion; it was predetermined by their birthplace.

industry (Freitag 2016). The CEOs of the German premium car industry (Audi, BMW and Mercedes) believe that the majority of their staff members have not yet understood the need for change because of increasing competition from Apple, Google and Tesla. Klaus Fröhlich from BMW states: 'Only a few grasp how serious the situation is' (translated from Freitag 2016:50).[19] Robert Stadler, Audi's chief financial officer, explains: 'We need a threat scenario; we have to communicate the danger in such a way that our staff members are really gripped by the message'.[20] Since the staff members are not ready for change, the CEOs decide to develop a doom scenario to persuade them.

The Greek philosopher Aristotle taught in his monograph on *Rhetoric* that there are three means of persuasion:

> The first kind depends on the personal character of the speaker; the second putting the audience into a certain frame of mind; the third on the proof, or apparent proof, provided by the words of the speech itself. (*Rhetoric* I.2.2)

The three means are categorised as *ethos*, *pathos* and *logos*, which still deliver a good framework for analysing rhetorical speeches.

Looking at a typical speech in a management context, I would argue that using religious vocabulary seldom contributes to the logic of the argument. Religious vocabulary is mainly used for pathos so 'that our staff members are really gripped by the message' (quoted above). Sometimes it is used for ethos. Describing the leader as a saint (Alvesson 2011) or as a priest (Ruth 2014) presents the leader as a good man or woman. As Aristotle already noted: 'We believe good men more fully and more readily than others', especially in those cases 'where exact certainty is impossible and opinions are divided' (*Rhetoric* I.2.4). If one wants to convince people of a mathematical theorem, neither pathos nor belief in the ethos of the speaker is required because, in principle, the audience could verify the mathematical proof. However, the future is an uncertain topic. Thus, speakers have to make use of ethos and pathos in order to persuade the audience to follow their lead. In this respect, spiritual or religious vocabulary seems to be extremely useful. It can however be used for manipulation as well. This will be discussed in the next section.

Toxic side effects of using spiritual vocabulary in management

Authors such as Bron (2003), Biberman and Coetzer (2005), Lips-Wiersma et al. (2009), Case and Gosling (2010) and Tourish (2013:59–70) have already published their critiques on workplace spirituality. Biberman and Coetzer (2005:70) mentioned the following concerns: (1) Spirituality can be used as a way to avoid or deny dealing with real organisational problems. (2) An organisation might impose spiritual or

religious beliefs on its members (3). Organisations can use spirituality or religion as a management tool. Lips-Wiersma et al. (2009:292) developed a 2×2 matrix to illustrate four critical workplace spirituality effects: seduction, manipulation, evangelisation and subjugation.

In my analysis, the use of spiritual vocabulary in management sciences has three toxic side effects: confusion of terms, manipulation and inappropriate pathos:[21]

1. *Confusion of terms*: A serious side effect of using spiritual vocabulary in management has already been demonstrated during the discussion on the use of the term 'vision': the fact that the term 'vision' first originated in Christian spirituality, was then redefined in management, and finally re-entered the vocabulary of Christian theology and church praxis, leads to a confusion of terms. Of course, one could easily cope with this side effect by specifying the sense in which one is using the word 'vision'. In my experience, though, some pastors and church leaders play around with this confusion of terms. They develop a vision as described in management theory (3), but by adding Bible verses to the vision, they create the impression that this vision is actually of divine origin (1). Then it becomes manipulation.

2. *Manipulation and subjugation*: By using spiritual vocabulary, the speaker might create the impression that his or her words are of divine origin. Visions may motivate, but they may also lead to power abuse because the visionary leader requests unquestioning obedience.[22] Visions may also manipulate others by subordinating human wishes 'to the will of another which is disguised in visionary form' (Pattison 1997:70). In this case, the spiritual language is instrumentalised, which leads to manipulation and subjugation, according to the matrix developed by Lips-Wiersma et al. (2009:293).

3. *Inappropriate pathos*: As described in the previous section, spiritual or religious vocabulary is included to strengthen the pathos of a speech. I agree that the emotions of the hearers have to be addressed. Still, sometimes the pathos seems to be inappropriate. Remember that the term 'evangelist' was borrowed from the New Testament. People's reaction to the message of these evangelists could result in eternal life or eternal death (according to New Testament teaching). I would agree that pathos is appropriate for such an important matter. However, when this pathos is used for a computer product, it sometimes appears misplaced.

To illustrate this argument, I would like to share an experience I had in a training seminar on communication. A student gave a presentation about the software tool *PowerPoint*.

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19. 'Wenige begreifen, wie ernst es ist' (Fröhlich in Freitag 2016:50).

20. 'Da kommen viele unserer Mitarbeiter nicht mehr mit. Wir brauchen aber ein Bedrohungsszenario; wir müssen die Gefahr so vermitteln, dass die Menschen wirklich gepackt werden' (Stadler in Freitag 2016:50).

21. In the oral presentations of this article, I mentioned another negative tendency within workplace spirituality, which is the 'erosion of boundaries between the two domains – personal spirituality … and work commitment' (Case & Gosling 2010:264). Providing sufficient evidence for this judgement would exceed the length of this article. I defer to Tourish (2013:76): 'Leaders of business organizations are not spiritual engineers or secular priests charged with responsibility for the human soul, and business organizations are not a suitable forum for exploring such issues.'

22. Kessler and Kessler (2012:35–45) list various tactics of power-addicted church leaders.

This student used to work as a full-time pastor and his speech was very emotional and persuasive, almost like a sermon. Another student expressed in his feedback that he did not like the pathos in this context: 'It was just about PowerPoint, not about life or death'. In this case, the pathos did not contribute to the persuasion but created resistance.

When I look at some vision statements, I am reminded of the underlying motif in the James Bond movies: To rescue the whole world (cf. the 1999 James Bond movie *The world is not enough*). The visions are so overwhelming, the pathos is so intense, that one gets the impression: this person or organisation wants to save the whole world in a James Bond manner, or at least to *change* the world, as Kawasaki (1991:vii) announced.

This article investigated the use of three religious terms in management literature. The intention was to point out the negative implications of this practice. On the one hand, people should become aware of this tool of manipulation. On the other hand, if people decide to use a term with spiritual origin in a management context, they should state clearly the sense in which they are using it.

Acknowledgements

Competing interests

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