

Contemporary research on faith, spirituality and religion at work and the study of Christians at work

Faith@Work Summit 2018

Chicago, IL

Tobias Brügger¹ and Markus Huppenbauer

Center for Religion, Economy and Politics (ZRWP)

University of Zurich, Switzerland

tobias.bruegger@ethik.uzh.ch

markus.huppenbauer@uzh.ch

Abstract: This report presents some of the key findings of a study of Christian managers in the German-speaking part of Switzerland and sketches its contribution to extant research relevant to the study of Christians in work contexts in contemporary Western societies. In current research, as it has emerged mainly in the context of management and organization studies, the existence of Christians at work is primarily approached via the three notions of faith, spirituality and religion at work. By focusing not primarily on these three notions, but instead on a conceptual map around different practitioner usages of the term ‘Christian(s)’ and its existential and nominal connotations, the present study provides the basis for an alternative framing of Christian existence at work. In addition, the research presented here uses descriptions of concrete scenes of Christian existence embodied at work to propose an empirically grounded theoretical sketch of key characteristics of Christian embodiment at work.

Key words: Faith, spirituality and religion at work, the study of Christians at work, Christian embodiment, Christ’s death and resurrection

1. Introduction

The presence of Christians in contemporary workplaces seems to elude and attract academic analysis at the same time. Our project addressed the question of how Christian existence is embodied at work. On the one hand, we analyzed the state of research in management and organization studies, as well as in theology. On the other hand, we conducted fieldwork among Christian business managers in the German-speaking part of Switzerland. The present report focuses primarily on the findings of the empirical study.

¹ This report is based on T. Brügger’s PhD dissertation completed at the University of Zurich.

Our research was designed with a focus on developing an empirically grounded theoretical sketch of Christian existence at work. We studied a sample of 18 managers which included variety in terms of the organization size, hierarchical position, gender, and denominational orientation of the managers. Using a combination of observation and interviews, we produced descriptions of concrete scenes and situations of lived Christian existence as the basis for our theory development. In the following I will, first, address the *framing* of Christian existence at work and, second, the *embodiment* of Christian existence at work.

2. Framing Christian existence at work

In extant research relevant to the study of Christians at work, there is a tendency to use one of the three terms faith, spirituality, or religion to refer to what is at stake in being a Christian at work. The term 'Christian', then, is used mainly as a subcategory of the broader categories of faith, spirituality and religion.² In other words, what characterizes Christians as Christians, is their Christian faith, spirituality or religion. The term thus designates one type of, say, faith³, among other types. Interestingly, in our study of Christian business managers in Switzerland, we discovered an alternative semantic frame which offers a different perspective on the practice and self-understanding of Christian business managers, and which we also found to be theoretically stimulating. In this frame, 'Christian' is not primarily employed as a subcategory of the concepts of faith, spirituality or religion, but as a main category in its own right. In other words, *the category of 'being a Christian'* can (but does not have to) stand on its own conceptual legs.

Slightly systematizing the managers' use of language, one can identify two different usages with different connotations of the term Christian as predominant. Corresponding to these two usages are two different modes of being a Christian, which we have referred to as *the nominal and existential modes of being a Christian*.⁴ In short, the nominal mode of being a Christian is a mode in which one's association with Christianity is mostly not considered relevant for one's daily living (at work and elsewhere). In other words, one is a Christian mainly on paper. In contrast, the existential mode of being a Christian refers to a mode of existence in which one's being a Christian becomes relevant for one's daily living.

What the managers under investigation shared is that at an earlier stage of their biography, they could all be described as being Christians mainly nominally, and they recounted some form of what we have termed '*activation*', where they transitioned from nominal to existential, where their Christianity had become relevant for their daily living, including their work life. All managers

² In theology, in addition to these three terms, the notion of 'ethics' also designates an important concept which is used to refer to and to frame Christian existence at work. Moreover, in theology as well as in management and organization studies, Christian existence is often conceptualized under the notion of 'tradition' (assuming that 'Christian' is a term which refers to a tradition or, as an umbrella term, to a family of traditions).

³ For two important contributions which focus on the concept of faith, see Lynn, Naughton and VanderVeen (2009) and Miller, Ewest and Neubert (2018).

⁴ On the level of the terminology used by the research participants, this distinction appears, among other things, in the form of different qualifications of being a Christian, such as 'practicing Christian', 'committed Christian', or 'convinced Christian'.

studied recounted a form of activation as a crucial aspect of their biography. The different forms of activation can be differentiated according to the presence or absence of initiating experiences, processes, and practices, such as conversion or baptism, and in terms of their singular or developing character within a timeframe. While some experienced the activation of Christian existence as a singular event, others experienced it more as a process of intensification. Additionally, while for some the activation experience was more of an inner process, for others it directly and immediately affected their life circumstances and, in particular, their professional orientation.

In terms of its substance, the main characteristics of an existential mode of being a Christian as described by the practitioners studied can be relatively clearly defined.⁵ A Christian mode of existence is marked by three interdependent characteristics: first, an emphasis on Jesus Christ, or an individual's Christ-orientation, second, an emphasis on a personal relationship with God and, third, an individual's orientation towards the Bible. These three aspects seem to be interrelated and mutually reinforcing.

3. Embodying Christian existence at work

Based on our analysis of scenes of Christian existence embodied at work, we found that the embodiment of Christian existence at work can be described in terms of different variations of the three elements which we refer to as '*distancing*', '*connecting*' and '*investing*'. The element that first caught our attention was that of distancing. Here are some examples:

A manager interrupts the stream of activities to pause and breathe consciously for a moment and to become aware of herself and the presence of God. The chairman of a meeting tries to be in contact with himself and with God during hectic moments to see more clearly in which direction he should guide the meeting. An entrepreneur feels free to invest his possessions in a new venture because his trust in God results in a decreased attachment to his possessions failure and success to be in God's hands. Others bring their worries, thoughts and feelings before God in prayer.

1) The moment of *distancing* is characterized by a distancing of oneself from 'the world'. Moments of distancing can be specified, first, with regard to the *object* from which managers distance themselves: the managers under study distanced themselves from a variety of things, such as difficult situations they encountered, ambitions, possessions, thoughts, emotions, roles, behaviors, et cetera. Second, moments of distancing can be specified with regard to different *modes*, such as ritualized, semi-ritualized or informal types of distancing. Additionally, particular modes of distancing can also be specified with respect to how they are related to concrete action: Distancing can refer to a separate act (such as the inclusion of pauses or prayer sequences in the

⁵ Even though the different profiles display different nuances and different configurations of the basic characteristics. This means that the denominational background and orientation of the managers studied was of secondary relevance for how they practiced and understood their Christian existence at work. In this respect, our study thus reflects Hans Joas' (2012:187f) observation of the dissolution of confessional milieus and the formation of an interdenominational Christian milieu, where it is valid that „die Trennungslinie verläuft immer weniger zwischen den Konfessionen und ihren Milieus und immer mehr zwischen Christen und Nicht-Christen“.

working day), or it can refer to a quality which accompanies particular acts of work, such as certain attitudes, for example in the case of the entrepreneur who is relaxed even though he invested all his possessions in a new venture.

2) The element of distancing is often intimately linked to a dynamic of *connecting* with God or Jesus Christ, for example, when a difficult situation is 'handed over to God' or 'laid down before God' in prayer or 'brought to the cross of Jesus'. Similar to that of distancing, moments of connecting can also be specified according to their *action reference*, in that they either comprise separate acts (e.g. a pause from work to pray or meditate) or accompany existing (work-related) acts.

3) The movements of distancing and connecting give way to a new relation to 'the world', which we have called *investing*, and which carries the marks of both distancing and connecting. It occurs, for example, in the paradigmatic case of the entrepreneur, who is free to invest his possessions in a new venture because his trust in God (connecting) results in a decreased attachment to his possessions (distancing). It occurs in the case of a manager who, before writing an e-mail or making a phone call, sits quietly for a moment, in order to let go of the noise of the thoughts in his mind (distancing) and to become prepared to pay attention or to be fully present to the task at hand (investing). Moments of investing can be specified according to the *currency* that is invested and according to the *project* or *target* in which it is invested. In terms of the currency of investing, for example, an entrepreneur invests his possessions and a manager invests her or his attention to be fully present for the task or person at hand.⁶

In summary, embodying Christian existence at work can thus be understood as being characterized by different configurations of the triad of distancing, connecting and investing.⁷ In particular, Christian engagement with the world (investing) seems to emerge in a dialectic tension with Christian disengagement from the world (distancing), while both Christian engagement with and disengagement from the world are orchestrated from and characterized by the individual's relationship with God (connecting).

⁶ Be it their possessions or their attention, one could argue that, ultimately, Christian managers invest *themselves*, as is indicated in a phrasing such as 'to be fully present' in what I am doing. The paying of attention, then, is an act of commitment of oneself to the work at hand, an investing of oneself in what one is doing. The full presence gained by investing oneself seems to be characterized, at the same time, by one's relationship with God and by losing oneself to God in the work at hand.

⁷ Although we have developed our theory of Christian existence embodied at work from our data of Christian managers, similar conceptions (although not particularly related to work contexts) can also be found in contemporary sociologies of religion (e.g. Mellor & Shilling 2014, Pollack & Rosta 2015). Even though we could not find a comprehensive theoretical conception of Christian existence at work similar to the one proposed here, extant research addresses particular aspects of what we have termed distancing, connecting and investing in various ways, see for example Black (2008), Brügger & Kretzschmar (2015), Cavanaugh and colleagues (2003), Daniels and colleagues (2012), Delbecq (2004), Honecker (1995), Ligo (2011), Lynn and colleagues (2009), Mabey and colleagues (2017), Miller and colleagues (2018), Radzins (2017) and Tucker (2010). Moreover, the three elements of distancing, connecting and investing also resonate with a Pauline understanding of the life of Christians (e.g. Colin Miller 2014). For a discussion of the relationship of extant theory to the theoretical sketch proposed here, see Brügger (forthcoming).

This dialectic of distancing and investing also seems to correspond with the Pauline literature, and in particular with Paul's insistence (e.g. in Romans 6-8) that those who belong to Christ participate bodily in Christ's death and resurrection (see e.g. Miller 2014). In particular, in a Pauline view, they participate in Christ's death by 'putting to death' their passions and desires situated in the body (distancing), while the Spirit infuses their bodies with Christ's death and resurrection life, which becomes visible in good and just conduct (investing) as they practice the body of Christ.

References

- Black, Michael 2008. Speaking the word to corporate managers. Some thoughts on practical corporate theology. In: *epd-Dokumentation* 44-45. 47-53.
- Brügger, Tobias forthcoming. The Christian body at work. PhD Dissertation at the University of Zurich.
- Brügger, Tobias & Kretzschmar, Louise 2015. Integrating Christian living and international management. In: *KOERS – Bulletin for Christian Scholarship* 80:1. 14-22.
- Cavanagh, Gerald; Hanson, Bradley; Hanson, Kirk & Hinojoso, Juan 2003. Toward a spirituality for the contemporary organization. Implications for work, family and society. In: Pava, Moses & Primeaux, Patrick (eds). *Spiritual intelligence at work. Meaning, metaphor, and morals*. Bingley: Emerald Group. 111-138.
- Daniels, Denise; Franz, Randal; Karns, Gary; Van Duzer, Jeff & Wong, Kenan 2012. Toward a theology of business. In: Okonkwo, Bartholomew (ed). *Finding meaning in business. Theology, ethics, and vocation*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan. 59-75. (*Incorrectly printed as: Daniels, Denise 2012. Toward a theology of business. In: Okonkwo, Bartholomew (ed). Finding meaning in business. Theology, ethics, and vocation. New York: Palgrave Macmillan. 59-75.*)
- Delbecq, Andre 2004. The Christian manager's spiritual journey. In: *Journal of Management, Spirituality & Religion* 1:2. 243-255.
- Honecker, Martin 1995. *Grundriss der Sozialethik*. Berlin & New York: Walter de Gruyter.
- Joas, Hans 2012. *Glaube als Option. Zukunftsmöglichkeiten des Christentums*. Freiburg im Breisgau: Herder.
- Ligo, Vivian 2011. Configuring a Christian spirituality of work. In: *Theology Today* 67:4. 441-466.
- Lynn, Monty; Naughton, Michael & VanderVeen, Steve 2009. Faith at work scale (FWS). Justification, development, and validation of a measure of Judaeo-Christian religion in the workplace. *Journal of Business Ethics* 85:2. 227-243.
- Mabey, Christopher; Conroy, Mervyn; Blakeley, Karen & de Marco, Sara 2017. Having burned the strawman of Christian spiritual leadership, what can we learn from Jesus about leading ethically? In: *Journal of Business Ethics* 145:4. 757-769.
- Mellor, Philip & Shilling, Chris 2014. Re-conceptualising the religious habitus. Reflexivity and embodied subjectivity in global modernity. In: *Culture and Religion* 15:3. 275-297.
- Miller, Colin 2014. *The practice of the body of Christ. Human agency in Pauline theology after MacIntyre*. Eugene: Pickwick.
- Miller, David; Ewest, Timothy & Neubert, Mitchell 2018. Development of the integration profile (TIP) faith and work integration scale. In: *Journal of Business Ethics*. Published online: 08 January 2018 .

Pollack, Detlef & Rosta, Gergely 2015. Religion in der Moderne. Ein internationaler Vergleich.
Frankfurt/New York: Campus.

Radzins, Inese 2017. Simone Weil on labor and spirit. In: Journal of Religious Ethics 45:2. 291-308.

Tucker, Travis 2010. Kierkegaard's purity of heart and the "Sunday-Monday gap." In: Theology Today 67. 24-35.