

TO BE A CHRISTIAN AND IN BUSINESS¹

Anton A. van Niekerk
University of Stellenbosch

Abstract

The article investigates the implications of Christian commitment for the practice and ethics of business. Attention is paid to the traditional schism between the spheres of faith and business, and an argument is developed to challenge this schism. Christianity's rightful concern about ethical business is defended in terms of its prophetic (vis-à-vis mystic) identity. The implications of Christian identity for business practice are finally spelt out with reference to the acquisition of a realistic anthropology, the possibility of reinterpreting key concepts in the business world, the responsibility of care for the needy and the potential for facilitating dialogue.

The rise of an industrial economy and the collapse of traditional religion are two of the most important hallmarks of our time. The alleged dilemma formulated in the title of this article reflects one aspect of the situation that came to pass because of these developments. Many authors who write on the relation between religion, ethics and business (cf. Obenhaus 1965, May 1982 and Novak 1982) point out the dramatic reverse of fortune that Christianity and the church have had in terms of influence on society since the Middle Ages.

During the Middle Ages, the answer to the question about the relevance of the Christian message and ethic for business activities would have been self-evident. Of course, 'business activities' during the Middle Ages had a distinctly different meaning from what this concept refers to nowadays. The point, however, is that during the Middle Ages the idea that any sphere of human activities or culture might be removed from the authority of the church, was largely inconceivable. The rise of Modernity since the Renaissance and the Reformation is to a significant extent the narrative of the gradual demise of ecclesiastical authority and influence in society at large, and of the rise in the power of business and industry. In fact, impressive arguments have been developed to indicate that the real power in modern societies has shifted from the church to well beyond political or state authorities. Power in fact nowadays resides very significantly in the hands of the great captains of industry, the chairmen and managing directors of the huge industrial conglomerates and multi-national corporations.²

It is not my task in this paper to reconstruct the way in which these shifts occurred since medieval times.³ Suffice it to say that the ambiguity about the relevance of Christianity for business and economics is the inevitable result of the separation of church and state since the Reformation. According to Rossouw, this separation took place for two reasons. Firstly, 'the denominational struggles after the Reformation made it impossible for the state to claim a theological legitimisation of its existence and actions, without at the same time becoming involved in the rivalry between denominations' (Rossouw 1994: 132). Pannenberg (1981:

¹ This article is based on a paper that was originally read to the First International Conference on Business Ethics in the African Context Today at Uganda Martyrs University, Uganda on 10 September 1996.

² For the way in which this kind of argument is set up with reference to specifically the huge media conglomerates of our times, cf. John B. Thompson 1990: 163-271, as well as his recent 1995.

³ For a brief but lucid discussion of these developments, cf. Rossouw 1994: 127-135, and for more extensive discussions, cf. Weber 1958, Williams 1982, as well as Sen 1987. In my own exposition, I will rely mostly on Rossouw.

14) argues in this regard that the state was consequently forced to find an alternative intellectual and political legitimisation. Secondly, the phenomenon of modern rationality, initiated by Descartes and Bacon, and brought to fruition by Enlightenment thinkers such as Hume, Kant and Hegel, in due course provided a new paradigm for legitimisation, not only of state institutions, but ultimately of the whole of European culture. Modern rationality is characterized by the demand that only two arbiters may be called upon to decide on the validity and status of knowledge claims. The first is logical thinking which operates according to rules that are equally to be honoured by all thinking people. The second is the demand of public, repeatable observations or experiences, i.e. experiences that are, in principle, accessible to all people and that can, therefore, be checked or verified by anybody. Thus, logical argumentation and evidence based on objectively testable, public experience constitute the hallmark of modern rationality.

The upshot of these developments was that religion increasingly ceased to play a decisive role in the legitimisation of the state and other social institutions. The to be expected consequence was growing doubt about the importance of religious belief and its concomitant ethical precepts outside of the sphere of personal life. The demise of religion and ethics in the public domain gave rise to the ideology of Postivism with its claim that there is a radical division between facts and values, and that science ought to operate on a completely value free basis. In economics, this led to what Sen calls the 'engineering approach' (Sen 1987: 4-5). Economists increasingly preferred to refrain from concerns about the morality and ends of the economy they were studying, and proceeded to focus almost exclusively on the mechanics of economic phenomena and processes (Rossouw, 1994: 133).

Theologians responded differently to the challenge of modern rationality. For some, the response was what Moltmann called 'inward emigration' (cf. Moltmann 1971: 55-59), i.e. withdrawal from the world, claiming that God is radically different from the world and therefore not interested in the social and scientific dynamics of this world. His relevance is restricted to the realm of personal relations, not politics, science and economics. These theologians projected their own position in the modern world onto their creator. Not only is the modern world not interested in God; God also has no interest in the modern world (Rossouw 1994: 134).⁴

Another approach by certain theologians was to approach a kind of 'textual positivism' in which the Bible was taken to be a basic set of data which were then, in turn, incorporated into a logically coherent rational belief system. The aim was conceptual accuracy and consistency with the data of scriptures. Consequently, theology took on a timeless and contextless character. Instead of relating faith in God to the cultural setting in which it operated, theology became a closed system obsessed with internal theoretical consistency, and therefore had little impact on modern culture (Rossouw 1994: 134-35).

Such were some of the developments that gave rise to contemporary pessimism about the possibility of interaction between the world of faith and the world of money. Economists who restrict their work to economic engineering and businesspersons who see profit making as the sole aim of their enterprise, without consistently feeling induced to ask the morally informed questions about norms and aims, find it hard to see what philosophers, theologians and the church have to do with economics. This does not mean that these people are

⁴ Rossouw also quotes Harvey Cox in this regard: '...having been squeezed into a corner by the modern world, theology made a virtue out of necessity and wrote its own reduced status into the being of the divine' (Cox 1984: 200)

necessarily atheists; however, they simply do not see what the faith they adhere to in their personal lives has to do with what they do in their professional lives. At the same time theologians who opt for the positions described above equally submit that 'the oil of religion and the water of modern economics and business do not mix' (Williams 1982: 131). A timeless theology does not interfere with messy temporal matters, and a religion privatised to personal relations finds it improper to become involved in social, political and economic matters.

The contemporary pessimism about the mutual relevance or interrelatedness of faith and business need, of course not only be the result of adherence to the grossly outdated and obsolete developments and positions which I briefly sketched above. Even if one does not believe that economics deals only with mechanisms, and not with aims, and even if one rejects inward emigration or the search for a timelessly valid and conceptually coherent theology, the temptation remains to maintain the schism between these two spheres of life. To keep religion and business apart, is always the easy way out. One can, for instance, insist that the values which are relevant to each enterprise differ significantly, and sometimes appear to be in direct conflict. Whereas business, particularly in its apparently triumphant capitalist mode, presupposes and thrives on the value of egocentrism or self-advancement, religion in general, and Christian ethics in particular, values altruism above all else as the key to successful social relations. Whereas business believes in market forces and their exploitation as the key to prosperity and wealth, Christianity can never buy the claim that the market should decide at all times and under all circumstances. The poor, whom the Bible compels us to have compassion with and care for, are, as Jesus Himself foresaw, always with us. The poor do not disappear in a market economy. In fact, market economies often appear to exacerbate the problems of poverty and depravation in modern industrial societies. In this regard, the reproach formulated by Jack Keiser becomes an often repeated refrain of our pessimistic interlocutors:

The key institutions of our [modern, industrialised] cities, the factories, the commercial undertakings, the finance houses [i.e. the world of business!] fail at crucial points to serve the common good. They produce wealth, but they fail to contribute to the enrichment of society as a whole. Their efficacy is called into question by the world's poor (Keiser 1978: 9).

In the same vein an argument can and often is constructed to the effect that, whereas business grows according to the principle of survival of the fittest, Christianity's *real raison de'tre* is compassion with and support of the helpless and the outcasts of society. It would therefore *prima facie* appear as if the values undergirding Christianity and business are quite dissimilar, and that a reconciliation of these values, let alone a reciprocity and mutual relevance between these institutions, is not easy to conceive or to achieve.

I reject these positions and arguments about the schism between business and Christianity. It is in fact surprising that people's understanding of both Christian faith and economic life could have taken these turns in history. The most objectionable aspect of the discussed positions is the claim that the Christian religion believes in a God that is not interested in the world of ordinary human activities, and that the Christian faith can therefore be a sphere of human activity separated from the political and economic dimensions of our lives. Nothing can be further from the truth for Christians who accept the Bible as the primary source of their beliefs and commitments. In this regard, I would like to propose that the attitude of someone who believes that faith requires us to separate our religious experience and our worldly activities, is essentially that of a mystic. Christianity, however, is not a mystic religion. It is a prophetic religion. By dealing briefly with the differences between the mystic and prophetic attitudes in religion, I hope to show how

utterly inconceivable the idea of an inevitable schism between business and Christianity really is.

Although one should be careful not to generalise too much, and bearing in mind important exceptions to the trends I am about to sketch, I would nevertheless maintain that one of the most important differences between Western religions or 'religions of the Book' (i.e. Christianity, Judaism and Islam), and most eastern religions (e.g. Hinduism and certain forms of Buddhism), is the relative predominance of prophecy and mysticism in each.⁵ Eastern religions are primarily mystic. And whatever else we may say about mysticism, it is inward looking.

Its techniques are designed to heighten and bring to focal awareness an otherwise implicit sense of the self as subject. Through meditation the believer is encouraged to disengage herself from wordly attachments of all sorts and to find her identity in a pure subjectivity beyond every sort of description. The culmination of this process is the realization within oneself of an identity which transcends even the self-other distinction (King 1974: 72). There is ultimately only one reality, and that is the Self.

This approach is not entirely limited to Eastern religions. It also has its spokesmen in the West.⁶ But it is not the dominant thought form in Western religions. King (1974: 72) asserts that that may be the case because the concept of the self in the latter religions is different. I shall, in what follows, confine myself to Christianity. In a biblically informed religion such as Christianity, man is primarily thought of as an agent, as one whose identity is in his action, and who therefore is 'deeply implicated in the world' (Ibid.). Although man is separate from the world, his sense of self-identity is gained through interaction with the world, rather than withdrawal from it. This is epitomized by the figure of the biblical prophet. In contrast to the mystic, the prophet's basic orientation is outward rather than inward. He looks for meaning in what is going on around him and seeks to respond accordingly. He identifies with his action. Whatever future he envisions for himself, it is as an agent. He conceives of himself as part of a community, yet a community which is also active, 'a community with a history' (King 1974: 73).

The mystic seeks God within and is disposed to conceive of Him as Pure Subject. The prophet, on the other hand, looks for God in the events of the outside world, conceiving of Him as the ultimate Agent. (King 1974: 73)

The prophet finds meaning or the absence of meaning in what goes on in the world. The world of everyday experience is the focus of his action and self understanding. What we know about God has, in his orientation, profound implications for the way in which people should live their lives. Conversely, the way in which people live affects the way in which God is known and glorified; the way our lives are conducted either facilitates or hinders the advent of his kingdom. One example: in the Book of Leviticus chapter 19 the people of Israel are invoked to be holy because God is holy. But to attain holiness does not ever in this context means to put distance between the world and the saints. On the contrary,

⁵ I am indebted for this idea to Robert King (1974: 70-76), although I utilise it here in a way slightly different from him. He develops the distinction between prophetic and mystical faith as indicator of the different ways in which the idea of the transcendence of God is understood in Eastern and Western religions. I am not primarily interested in the concept of transcendence in this paper; rather in different models of religious commitment in relation to ordinary life - including business and politics.

⁶ I am not well enough informed about traditional African religions to assess where they should be classified in terms of this distinction. It would be an interesting study to undertake.

holiness for these people means 'when you reap the harvest of your land, you shall not reap to the very edges of your field, or gather the gleanings of your harvest. You shall not strip your vineyard bare, or gather the fallen grapes of your vineyard; you shall leave them for the poor and the alien. I am the Lord your God' (Lev. 19: 9-10).

In the same vein the Old Testament prophets do not call the people to a life of meditation and withdrawal from the world, but invoke them to live in peace and justice and vehemently reprimand them whenever iniquities such as false scales occur or when the plight of the widows, orphans and outcasts are not relieved. The prophets engage the world, react to it, see it as the arena of God's own action and the terrain where his kingdom shall eventually arrive in glory. In no conceivable sense can biblical faith imply a separation between ourselves and everyday life. Biblical religion is not an activity focused on one compartment, the so-called 'spiritual side', of human existence, but permeates all aspects of our actual life in the world. For that reason Christian identity and business activities cannot ever be shut down in separate, mutually impenetrable and mutually irrelevant compartments. In the Bible, God does not primarily act within the confines of the soul; He acts in the world; His actions initiate history and are consistently entwined within history. 'When the fullness of time had come, God sent His son, born of a woman, born under the law...' (Gal. 4:4). Biblical history starts in a garden and ends in a city, the New Jerusalem, descending like a bride from heaven. Between garden and city lies the expanse of world history, eventually subsumed within the history of redemption. The Christian life, therefore, is lived in the world, focuses on the world, prays for the world, is inspired by the opportunities and needs of the world, expects the eventual redemption and sanctification of the world.

There can, then, be no doubt about the fact that Christian commitment has extremely important consequences for every aspect of practical life, including the world of business, industry and economics. That brings us to the question as to what a Christian business ethics is supposed to mean. In this regard I am particularly grateful for the organisers of this conference who suggested the title 'To be a Christian and be in business' for my talk. Had the suggestion been for me to explicate the idea of a 'Christian business ethics', I would have been more than hesitant. I do not deem it very prudent to use the epithet 'Christian' too easily or lavishly, particularly as a qualification of academic disciplines such as business ethics. The reason for that is simple: it can very easily be presumptuous for a person who proposes a position to identify that proposed position as 'Christian'. A person/action/position does not gain the quality of 'Christian' by being identified thus by the person concerned. Whether my beliefs or actions are Christian is, as I understand the Bible, not for me to decide, but for others. When the term 'Christian' is first mentioned in the Bible, it is with reference to the disciples of Jesus who were, in Antioch, for the first time called Christians (Acts 11:26). It is not an epithet they bestowed on themselves or their own positions and actions. To be called 'Christian' is the outcome of other people judging our positions and actions with one yardstick: is this what one would expect from a follower of Christ?

The question therefore is not whether a complete ethical system or programme of 'Christian business ethics' can or should be developed. The question is much rather how one's Christian commitment is relevant for the world of business, and what implications that commitment, in particular circumstances, has for the unified human identity that God has made possible for those whom He called out of darkness into his marvelous light (1 Peter 2:9). An ethics informed by the Bible does not start with the question 'what must I do', but with 'who am I?' (Williams 1986: 473), resp. it does not take its departure from the precepts of a system, but from the discovery and nurturing of an identity.

I therefore propose that the question of the relevance of Christian commitment for the practice of business can best be answered by exploring the nature of the Christian identity and its implications. The first point I want to make in this regard is that Biblically informed Christianity provides us with a realistic anthropology, i.e. a realistic image of man. The Christian image of man is that of both sinner and potential saint - that what Luther had in mind with his phrase *simul iustus et peccator*. The Bible tells us of our fall from grace as well as of our redemption through the death and resurrection of Christ. The anthropology of the Bible thus rescues us from expecting both too much and too little from people. Because we know of the reality of sin, we are never oblivious of or naive about the real and possible iniquities of the business world: the greed, malice, envy and fraud that so often prevail. The Christian is not overly surprised by facts and figures such as the following about the situation in e.g. South Africa:

The South African state is said to lose some R17 billion every year as a result of tax evasion - and the problem is that it is in many sectors of society argued that this situation is a rational response towards a government which the majority of citizens in the past regarded as illegitimate. On 31 December 1995 the Commercial Branch of the SAPS was handling 25 260 cases of white-collar crime, involving some R7.3 billion. Some 80% of these cases involved fraud, and the other 20% theft (from employers) as well as transgressions of more than 50 statutes which the branch polices. The investigative workload of the police in this regard is becoming almost unmanageable; on average, detectives handle 20 dockets each at the moment. Besides this, on 29 February 1996 the Office for Serious Economic Offences (OSEO) was investigating 33 matters involving approximately R8.5 billion. In recent a study done by Unisa's Dept. of Criminology in which 200 businesses were sampled, it was found that 20% of these businesses suffered financial loss in excess of R50 000 through employee fraud over a period of one year (Shaw & Camerer 1996: 51-67). These realities are explained by the biblical view of man: a sinner, someone who lives only for himself and cares little about the needs of others, someone in need of redemption. The Christian cannot therefore but demand measures to monitor and control the aberrations happening every day in the world of business practices, and demand with many others the introduction of and adherence to codes of ethics that might conscientize and inspire people about the desperate need for elevated moral integrity in business.

But sin and iniquity, malice and greed, hate and violence are not the only things to be said about mankind in terms of a biblical anthropology. In fact, one of the imminent dangers of Christian perspectives on business ethics is the impression which is often created that Christians only wish to point out that which is negative and morally corrupt in business practices. Christians should be cautiously aware of the danger of becoming perpetual Jeremaic lamenters of the business world. The relevance of Christianity for business need not and should not always be warning, admonishment and reprimand. The Bible does not only tell us of the dark side of human nature. It confronts us with the reality of grace and redemption, of a realised alternative for the evil of our world and our times. Let us not forget that the cross we have to bear in terms of sin and evil is the cross of the One who was resurrected (Moltmann 1972: 13), whose empty grave is both the promise and the reminder of a new reality, a new creation, a re-creation that God has accomplished for the whole of creation. Christians are therefore more than perpetual lamenters of the evils of this world. They are witnesses to and co-creators of a new world, a world in which grace has triumphed, where people choose to serve rather use one another, where providing for the needs of the poor are not merely a mechanism to soothe our conscience but a challenge to creative thinking about the social responsibility of profitable businesses, where the growth

of business is not only directed towards people's created needs but also in tune with their real needs, where honesty and fair practices are not the recourse of the weak but the pride of the strong and powerful, where role models are created and followed, not only on the basis of profit making prowess, but also on the basis of integrity and compassion.

Let me conclude with three suggestions about the way Christian identity informs and hopefully even transforms ideas and practices in the world of business. Firstly, the Christian message creates the insight and opportunity to re-interpret the way certain central concepts are understood and used in business. For example, corporate life and practice seem to foster an unduly authoritarian concept of power and influence. The powerful is thought of and understood as the one who can impose her will at all times, who carries the responsibility and therefore makes the decisions, who will not tolerate opposition and whose sole task is to destroy competition. I am the last to deny the value, importance and even imperative of strong leadership in running a successful business. But leadership need not be the same as authoritarian power wielding. The authority of the leader is not equal to the power of the demagogue. A Christian in a position of authority in business is of necessity someone who will take underlings along rather than walk over them, who will understand the claims that personal circumstances sometimes have on employers, who will try to inspire by example and industry rather than by threats and ultimatums. In the same vein, Christian sobriety can help us to re-interpret the meaning of personal wealth which is often regarded as the sole end of business. The Christian is not against financial wealth; in the Bible, personal riches are often portrayed as a sign of God's grace and goodness towards people. But Christians are and should always be uncomfortable with extravagant demonstrations of wealth and with the unbridled yearning for luxury. The reminder of the needs of the underprivileged who are always there, even if their lot can in no way be linked to the fortunes of a certain company, is, for the Christian, a persistent invocation to live modestly and to invest prudently.

My second suggestion is closely related to what has just been said. Christian commitment can never divorce itself from awareness of the needs of the poor, the outcasts and the voiceless. A Christianity that has turned completely bourgeois, that usurps and internalises in its entirety the morality and interests of the affluent part of society, loses an essential element of the identity that Christ bestows on us. I am intensely aware of the complex causes of poverty and of the limited resources and mechanisms available to both government and business to alleviate poverty, let alone abolish it. To a Christian, however, it remains impossible to be at ease with the suffering of the underprivileged. The poor are the consistent reminder that God's kingdom on earth is still incomplete, still no more than an ideal. The rest and peace which God's redemptive work bring to the soul is never a cause for complacency and quietism. In view of poverty and suffering, that peace in fact is transformed into unrest, into consistent effort to become part of God's compassionate intervention to restore his creation. In fact, Christians understand that the final redemption of the whole of creation remains incomplete as long as the task of reconciliation is incomplete. Reconciliation, however, is not only something that happens to the soul or inner being. Reconciliation implies the healing of the total person, body, soul and spirit. In short, Christians, everywhere and always, including the world of business, cannot ever shun their calling to be the voice of the voiceless, the protectors of the powerless, the facilitators of compassion and provision for those who are forsaken by the rest of society. The challenge to Christians in the world of business is to move beyond the mere oral confession of this identity and commitment, and to conceive and construct practical programs which can put business in the service of the needy in a way which does not compromise its economic viability, which moves beyond the mere handing out of alms, but

which indeed facilitates the ability of the poor and needy to help themselves and to provide for themselves.

My last suggestion is that Christians are called to facilitate dialogue, mutual understanding, tolerance and transparency in the *modus operandi* of the business world - in short, to explore ways and means to instill values that are drawn from the Scriptures into a world where the levels of competition, pressure, and the demands for success and survival often create a climate that is not at all conducive to the maintenance of humane practices and fulfilling interpersonal relationships. To accept God's incarnation in Christ is to accept that God is at work in the world, that He creates possibilities, facilitated by a certain value orientation, than can make a difference, and that Christians are called to co-operate with Him in this regard. The Christian businessperson is inspired by the vision of industry and commerce to serve the common good, and therefore be instrumental in the coming of God's Kingdom. This goal is unattainable except through the medium of institutions and organizations. To be gripped by Christian faith is, on the one hand, to be inspired by the possibilities which arise from man's control over nature, his ability to plan and to organize, and the effort he puts in at the workplace, in the office and in the boardroom. On the other hand, it is to be immersed in the struggles, frustrations and disappointments, both individual and collective, which are part of the work scene in business. The example and the message of Jesus is that God is present in the situations where men and women work and do business, and that we should recognize Him, not only in the fortunes of prosperity, but also in the faces of those with whom we share this life and for whom, because they crossed my path, I have become their neighbour.

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