

Modernism, Christianity, and Business Ethics: A Worldview Perspective

David Kim
Dan Fisher
David McCalman

ABSTRACT. Despite growing interest in examining the role of religion in business ethics, there is little consensus concerning the basis or standards of “good” or ethical behavior and the reasons behind them. This limits our ability to enhance ethical behavior in the workplace. We address this issue by examining worldviews as it relates to ethics research and practice. Our worldview forms the context within which we organize and build our understanding of reality. Given that much of our academic work as well as business practice operate from a modern worldview, we examine how modernism shapes our beliefs and approaches to ethics in business and academia. We identify important limitations of modernism in addressing moral issues and religion. We then introduce the Christian worldview as an alternative approach to examining ethical issues in business

KEY WORDS: Christianity, business ethics, modernism, religion, worldview

Introduction

In the midst of ongoing corporate ethics violations, there has been great interest in discussing moral issues related to business including the corporate social responsibility debate and the introduction of business ethics in management programs (Conroy and Emerson, 2004; McWilliams and Siegel, 2001; Shannon and Berl, 1997). One intriguing outcome of this discussion has been attempts to integrate spirituality and religion into business practice as a means to address the seemingly intractable ethical problems that plague contemporary organizations (Gotsis and Kortezi, 2007; Singhapakdi et al., 2000). We say this is intriguing, because for hundreds of years, religion and spirituality have been literally exorcised from modern forms of

institutional organization. But does a blending of spirituality with commerce, a religious worldview with a modern one, offer a way to rethink our approach to business ethics? We explore this question in detail. In particular, we consider the Christian worldview as an alternative to the dominant modernist paradigm as a useful ethical perspective in the realm of business.

Different faiths including Christianity, Judaism, and Islam have much to say about business practice either directly or by implication. Arising from Judaism, Christianity values one’s work as fulfillment of spiritual life. In a similar vein, Islamic teaching promotes economic activity as a means to social justice and spiritual enhancement (Brammer et al., 2007; Epstein, 2002; Weaver and Agle, 2002). The positive link between one’s beliefs and higher ethical attitudes in the workplace is well documented (e.g., Conroy and Emerson, 2004; Longenecker et al., 2004). More recent research has examined workplace spirituality (e.g., Gotsis and Kortezi, 2007; Pava, 2003) and discussed the merits of integrating religion with corporate practice (Calkins, 2000; Epstein, 2002). In 2004, *Business & Professional Ethics Journal* devoted an entire issue to living the Christian life in the corporate world (see Chase, 2004). In practice, many business leaders have been explicit in basing their business decisions on their religious convictions. For instance, Truett Cathey, founder and chief executive of Chick-fil-A, decided to close the restaurant chain on Sundays in honor of the Sabbath (Weaver and Agle, 2002).

Despite extensive work in this area, there is little consensus concerning the basis or standards of “good” or ethical behavior and the reasons behind them. Ethical standards are often implicitly assumed, or religious values such as those found in the golden rule or what is common across religions are strongly

avored as a normative foundation for business ethics (Brammer et al., 2007). However, others have persuasively argued that attempts to establish universal standards of right versus wrong are futile given that each person has his/her own moral philosophy (e.g., Forsyth 1992), such that religion can be, but does not have to be, the source of ethical standard. This current approach to religion and business ethics constrains our attempts to enhance ethical behavior in the workplace. To date, there has been little or no evidence that corporate ethics has improved overall.

We address this issue by examining worldviews as it relates to ethics research and practice. The term worldview is a translation of the German word *Weltanschauung*, or a way of looking at the world (Pearcey, 2004). Our worldview forms the context within which we organize and build our understanding of reality. It is the presuppositions we have about the nature of reality, knowledge, morality, and life's meaning and purpose. Everyone has convictions about how reality functions and how s/he should live. Everyone decides what is real and important, or unreal and unimportant. Our beliefs and values are imbedded in our worldview (Sire, 1997; Walsh and Middleton, 1984). Collective worldviews change over time. What was once considered to be eminently true and right is no longer the case. Conduct and behavior once widely held as unacceptable or even perverse is now tolerated or has become the norm (Daniels et al., 2000; Pearcey, 2004).

A worldview shapes our culture and expresses itself in all social institutions including the arts, religion, education, media, and business. In the academic arena, the researcher's worldview has enormous implications in that it affects the way studies are designed and how conclusions are drawn. In business practice, it dictates the way we resolve ethical issues and make decisions at work. Much of our academic literature is framed from a modern and postmodern worldview. According to the modern worldview (modernism), reality, knowledge, and morality are founded in science, human reasoning, and objective evidence. Faith in God along with other beliefs and values are entirely personal and subjective and, therefore, has no place in the realm of objective truth (Pearcey, 2004). With the post-modern worldview (postmodernism), the nature of reality, knowledge, and morality is self-defined and self-referential. Postmodernism questions

whether we can know anything with certainty (Daniels et al., 2000). Depending on one's worldview, knowing what is (or should be) true versus false or ethical versus unethical will differ substantially.

Therefore, we ask the question: has the triumph of modernism in so many areas, including ethics, marginalized other useful worldviews that may offer insight and guidance for businesses and researchers? To answer, we first explore how modernism shapes our beliefs and approaches to ethics in business and academia. We describe the basic tenets of modernism and their impact on religion and business ethics and practice. In this analysis, we develop the reasons from a modernist vantage point for excluding spirituality and religion from the domain of business. Second, this inquiry enables us to call to attention important limitations that result from the modern worldview. These are the ethical blind spots of modernism that cause problems. Based on these shortcomings, we introduce alternative worldviews into the ethical conversation, and in particular, Christianity. We use Christianity as an illustration because it is still the major religion in the West and serves as an ethical framework for many in their personal lives. Historically, Christianity was the main target for exclusion by modernist thinkers. And yet there is a growing stream of corporate practice and academic research that is fruitfully exploring and implementing the Christian ethic (e.g., Calkins, 2000; Epstein, 2002). In the next section, we look at how modernism triumphed over religion and rewrote the basis for business ethics, an approach that dominates to this day.

Opposing worldviews: modernism and Christianity

Christianity arose out of the unique worldview, as well as the ethical practices of Judaism. As in the case of Islam later, Christianity acknowledged the authority of Hebrew Scriptures (Latourette, 1975; Schaff, 1994; Tierney and Painter, 1983). The Christian worldview was dominant in Europe prior to the Enlightenment. This view holds that there are valid, non-empirical sources of knowledge about the nature of reality. Specifically, there is a God who existed before the world existed, and he is the

ultimate origin of everything else. The basis of this worldview is found in scriptures and the culture that was born from the early church (Daniels et al., 2000; Pearcey, 2004).

Modernism represents the post-Enlightenment philosophy of empiricism and human reason. In opposition to the preceding Judeo-Christian and Islamic worldviews, modernism held that only physical matter exists. Nothing exists outside the material world, which itself can be known and understood through the physical senses in conjunction with the scientific method. This view denies the transcendent, or supernatural, dimension and excludes all non-empirical ways of knowing. In other words, modernism rejects the possibility that there is more to the world than what we can directly access with our senses, or that there is a dimension of reality underlying what we can see that provides a source of meaning, purpose, and coherence beyond the physical events that we observe. The focus is restricted to cause and effect relationships in a closed system (Daniels et al., 2000; Yaman, 2003).

Modernism has its origins in the Enlightenment, the age of reason, scientific discovery, and human autonomy (Veith, 1994). The emerging sciences during the Enlightenment were founded on the Biblical view that nature is the good and orderly work of a personal God and in the classical view that absolute rational laws govern nature. Early scientists such as Francis Bacon (1561–1626), Copernicus (1475–1543), Galileo (1564–1642), and Kepler (1571–1630) among others shared the Christian view that God had created the universe, and that man, by use of his reason, could discover the mysteries of the universe (Schaeffer 1968).¹

By the 1700s science progressed so rapidly that it seemed as if science could explain everything. The rise of modern science during this period was truly impressive. It was characterized by a rapid growth in knowledge in many different areas including medicine, biology, anatomy, electricity, mechanics, and astronomy. Scientists developed knowledge by building on the works of others and relied heavily on logic, observation, and experimentation (Hunt, 1991). Some saw no limits to the power of human reason operating upon the data of the senses.

As modernism continued to gather momentum into the nineteenth century, reference to God was essentially eliminated. Charles Darwin argued that

God was not even necessary to explain the creation. In describing the “origin of species” in terms of the closed natural system of cause and effect, Darwin removed the need for any kind of creator. Nature became completely self-contained. Science could now explain everything. Modernists believed the growth of newly discovered facts based on human reasoning, and the scientific method would yield a unified answer for all knowledge and life (Veith, 1994).

Modern thinking led to the development of social sciences such as sociology and psychology. Methodologies designed to study nature were applied to human beings. Sociology examined human institutions while psychology sought to explain the inner life of human beings, all in terms of a closed natural system accessible by empirical scientific methods (Veith, 1994).

Later, the development of business disciplines such as management and marketing would owe much to the methodologies, theories, and worldviews of sociology and psychology researchers.

With modernism, Christianity was no longer compatible with truth (answers for all knowledge and life). Truth resided in the scientific community, in a closed natural system of cause and effect. Over time, references to Christianity were removed from the public arena such as schools and government. Religion was simply a matter of personal choice and, thus, did not belong in public institutions such as the state, academia, and large corporations which are considered to be objective, scientific, and value-free. Through science and reason there is universal truth or truth that is binding on everyone. Religion would have no claim to objective knowledge (Pearcey, 2004).

Modernism, morality, and business ethics

Throughout most of Western history, moral issues were very much tied to Christianity. But as modernism became increasingly dominant, ethical questions were addressed without referencing God or his word. The emergence of Utilitarianism offered a different approach to moral issues. Utilitarians decided moral issues not by appealing to transcendent absolutes but by studying the effect of an action upon the system. Stealing was wrong, not because

the Ten Commandments say so, but because stealing interfered with the economic functioning of society. Practicality became the sole moral criterion. If it worked, it must be good (Veith, 1994). The influential pragmatist philosophers William James (1907) and John Dewey (1920, 1922) explicitly argued for functionality as the measurement both of ethics and indeed of truth itself. Schiller (1912) equated truth with “good,” asserting that truth is determined by those actions which have good consequences.

Furthermore, intellectuals of the Enlightenment argued that since God was no longer needed to explain creation, he was no longer needed to determine moral laws. Reason would replace God to establish morality. Ethics would be discussed increasingly in philosophical and scientific terms, as opposed to theology. Without God or transcendent truth to establish one’s values, modernism turned to science and philosophy along with tradition and cultural norms as the basis of what is good or right (Calkins, 2000; Daniels et al., 2000). However, attempts to resolve ethical issues without God could only result in moral relativism where ethical standards were relative to a particular culture, individual, or time in history.

Moral relativism is expressed in our culture where conduct once considered immoral or even perverse is now tolerated or has become the new norm (Pearcey, 2004). Tolerance is increasingly viewed as the highest ethic. This is not the traditional view of tolerance in which one tries to recognize and respect other people’s values without necessarily accepting those values as being correct. Instead, tolerance implies that all values, beliefs, and claims to truth and lifestyles are equal. However, if all of these things are equal, no one could claim that one person’s ethics are any better than another’s (Cotton, 1996).

In business ethics literature, Singhapakdi et al. (2000) and Tsalikis et al. (2001) among others acknowledge moral relativism as the main orientation of moral thought. Ferrell and Gresham (1985) in discussing their contingency framework for understanding ethical decision making recommend focusing on contexts and variables that influence ethical behavior instead of attempting to discover universal moral principles. The context in which an ethical act can be viewed can be historical, cultural, situational, or individual. Forsyth (1992) notes that attempts to determine right versus wrong in business would be fruitless given that each individual applies

different moral philosophies. At best we can aim for a fuller understanding of our own and others’ reactions to various types of business practices.

Ethical standards are often implicitly assumed, or religious values such as the golden rule or what is common across religions are strongly favored as a normative foundation for business ethics (Brammer et al., 2007). Non-religious frameworks such as the social contract theory (Dunfee et al., 1999) and Kantian deontology (Rachels, 1986; Raphael, 1989), among others, have been applied to address corporate ethics. However, attempts to identify and apply absolute standards for ethical conduct have been unsuccessful as researchers and practitioners search for a relative balance between ethics and the bottom line and personal values. A serious limitation of moral relativism, then, is the inability to determine an absolute standard of good or ethical behavior and the reasons behind it (Shaw and Barry, 1992).

Besides moral relativism, modernism helped to shape the meaning and purpose of one’s vocation or business. The rejection of God and the Biblical view of creation meant that human beings were no longer God’s handiwork but instead were merely a part of nature, driven by self-interest and expediency. The Protestant work ethic was separated from its Christian context of stewardship and service and viewed only as a means to material success.

In the late eighteenth century, for example, Adam Smith defined work solely as a means of fulfilling one’s self-interest. Whereas Christian ethics had regarded self-interest as a vice to be overcome for the common good, Smith contended that self-interest was actually good for society that the best thing for the economy is for everyone to stand out of its way and give free reign to “the invisible hand,” which ensures that supply and demand will always balance. This system promoted what Christianity had traditionally renounced as immoral: self-interest instead of concern for the common good, personal ambition instead of altruism, and drive for personal gain and self-advancement instead of self-sacrifice and charity (Colson and Pearcey, 1999). Without God, the purpose of work or vocation changed to personal achievement, material possessions, and status.

From a modernist perspective, business ethics is justified because of its impact on corporate outcomes such as reduced employee turnover, increased productivity, and profitability (e.g., Daniels et al.,

2000). Although maximizing corporate profits in an ethical manner is paramount, the essence of integrity, altruism, and corporate social responsibility is trivialized when their purpose is solely to enhance the bottom line (Gotsis and Kortezi, 2007).

Christianity and business ethics: alternative perspective

To this point, our discussion has centered on the limitations of modernism on business ethics – namely, moral relativism and a materialistic focus regarding ethical behavior. We next examine how the Christian worldview addresses these issues followed by how it might influence ethics research.

Christian ethics founded on Scripture gives moral standards or a common platform that allow us to judge between right and wrong. In business situations, people must decide what they ought to do and what ethical principles to follow. They must know that these principles are right and that it is reliable. This is not to say that an absolute moral law must be strictly followed given that the boundaries of moral law and its varied applications will always be debated. But the very idea of right and wrong makes sense only if there is a final standard by which we can make moral judgments (Colson and Pearcey, 1999).

Furthermore, much of what researchers and business professionals seek as ethical standards and behavior are found in Scripture. For instance, the Ten Commandments provides the foundation for many of today's laws governing business practices including truthfulness in business transactions, proper entitlement, and so forth. Also, the life and teachings of Jesus provide moral guidance in business. The parable of the rich fool and the parable of the talents teach about proper management of possessions and diligence at work. The primacy of love and service to others is consistent with the goals of corporate social responsibility (Calkins, 2000).

It should be noted that simply citing a chapter and verse for the moral statement being made, or insisting that God has demanded it, is not sufficient to make a Christian ethic (Rossouw, 1994). Likewise, Christian ethics is not a set of isolated moral principles but is dependent on a prior Christian view of reality as expressed in the relationship between God and his people. What is expressed in

Scripture is not a set of principles or rules, but rather a comprehensive understanding of reality such as all life originating from God, the nature of God and man, and life's meaning. Christian ethics requires the use of reason to derive from Scripture certain precepts and narratives that guide human action and bring about certain consequences, primarily to pursue the ideals of love and service to others (Calkins, 2000) and practicing good stewardship of money and resources.

Rossouw (1994, p. 564) offers the following illustration:

Someone with a Christian understanding of the unconditional value of life, cannot be careless in the workplace about products and quality-standards that pose a threat to the lives of consumers or employees. Neither can someone who believes that humans have the responsibility to cultivate and protect nature, be careless about pollution and ozone-depletion. In the same way, someone with a conviction that special care should be taken of the unfortunate in society, cannot be unconcerned about employment practices that cause hardships for employees in their old age.

In recent years, the assumptions of modernism have been challenged by the postmodern worldview which questions whether we can know anything with certainty (Daniels et al., 2000). And as post-modern thinking has become more dominant in our culture and academe, it has opened the door for business ethicists to explore alternative worldviews, like Christianity, to explain the nature of reality, knowledge, and morality.

Approaching business ethics research from a Christian worldview requires us to re-think our assumptions and beliefs about religion and the nature of reality. Works by Christian writers and thinkers would suggest that Christianity is more than a religion or a set of moral guidelines or beliefs. It is a worldview that applies to all areas including social issues, history, politics, science, and anthropology (Pearcey, 2004). Whereas modernism assumes that knowledge, truth, and morality are founded in science and reason, Christianity is based on the understanding that God was the creator of the universe, and that man, by use of his reason, could discover the mysteries of the universe. Contrary to popular notion, Christian thinking is not opposed to science and scientific discoveries or to a rational

understanding of the world as evidenced by the works of early scientists.

Finally, Scripture has much to say about human nature and behavior that is consistent with what we observe in ourselves and others. Given the challenge among business ethicists and business leaders to create a more ethical environment, ethics research from a Christian viewpoint may offer insights that promote morality in the workplace.

Note

¹ Some of these men indeed clashed with particular ecclesiastical bodies in their days, but notwithstanding the conflicts they had with church governments, theirs was always a firmly grounded, implicit Christian worldview.

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University of Central Arkansas,
Conway, U.S.A.
E-mail: davidk@uca.edu

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