

“Profiting from Prophets? Or Propheting from Profits?”

Prophets, Profits, and Peace: The Positive Role of Business in Promoting Religious Tolerance

Timothy L. Fort

(New Haven: Yale University Press, 2008)

A Review by William C. Frederick, October 2008

Tim Fort believes there is compatibility (though largely unrealized) of religious belief and business practice. He favors drawing on deep, widespread, even hard-wired reservoirs of religious belief to promote workplace harmony, enhanced effectiveness, human rights, ethical behavior, and—especially—an informed sense of personal meaningfulness and transcendence in today’s global workplace. These conditions and outcomes are best realized in companies organized as small-scale units that inculcate a moral identity for all participants through close and continuing interactions and cooperation. Trust—organizationally infused and reinforced by law, stakeholder dialogue, and personal spiritual commitment—transforms both company and employees into a humane, ethical, purpose-driven collective enterprise. The same principles are operative beyond the workplace itself as religiously-inspired companies are thus more likely to promote peaceful relationships within the societies where they do business, thereby contributing to world peace in an age of globalization.

Well, never let it be said that Tim Fort tackles small challenges! In a previous book, *Business, Integrity, and Peace* [reviewed elsewhere on this website], he made the case for “peace through commerce”. Now it is to be “ethical commerce through religion.” Truth to tell, Fort believes they are, or can be, one and the same. As typical of his entire oeuvre, Fort says forthrightly that he may be wrong: “Although by nature a rosy optimist, I am pessimistic about business claiming an active role in fostering sustainable peace and in fostering religious harmony.” And again: “I want to suggest that there may be no solution to the violence spawned by religion, nor may the world avoid ecological catastrophe” brought on by “unbridled capitalism.”

Timothy Fort, the Lindner-Gambal Professor of Business Ethics at George Washington University, lays out his case in 6 chapters, devoted to the following themes:

- **Globalization’s Flashpoints.** Business encounters religion at many points, often negatively, other times accommodatively, and across a global spectrum of differing religious traditions. The author’s message to business: Religion is here; live with it.
- **Religion’s Good, Bad, and Ugly Sides.** The expression and activation of religious belief in the workplace can produce both beneficial and negative effects but is best carried off if done in ways that minimize the authoritarian imposition of a CEO’s religious commitments, avoid evangelical assertiveness, protect human rights, and preserve a sense of personal dignity. Broadly ecumenical dialogue that embraces a

diversity of religious traditions can move in the direction of workplace peace and ethical behavior.

- **Business's Credibility Problem.** To be socially acceptable, business needs to be trusted on three levels: obeying the law (Hard Trust), engaging stakeholders impacted by business operations (Real Trust), and seeking/permitting/encouraging workplace moral dialogue (Good Trust). The latter kind of trust is rooted not just in sociocultural religious traditions but in our biological nature, thus linking a hard-wired spiritual/moral quest to business purpose and business ethics.
- **Whose Religion? Which Spirituality?** Given religion's historical record of spawning violence and hatred, business's prospects for succeeding through religious dialogue and sponsorship may seem dim. Offsetting this propensity is a hard-wired human tendency linking self-interest/esteem/worth to a harmonious common good, plus broad consensus and overlap among the world's religions toward the same ends, thereby permitting a dialogue of tolerance and peacefulness to go forward in the workplace.
- **Religious Republicanism and Right-Sized Communities.** Theories of civic republicanism—whether Reaganistic, liberal, or communitarian—fail to incorporate religious ideas into their search for a common civic good. By providing a language and logic of the common good, religion can be an educational carrier promoting the pursuit of moral virtues, while small-scale mediating institutions within business can cultivate republican/civic virtues. Together, these twin forces enhance and encourage adherence to business ethics and corporate social responsibility.
- **The Company of Strangers.** A convergence of ethical business behavior with an already well established commitment to world peace by religious traditions, plus the open expression of spirituality in the workplace increase the likelihood of attaining long-run world peace, social acceptance of business corporations, and an enhanced moral identity for business practitioners.

The boldness, indeed the audacity, of this argument will undoubtedly dismay some readers, and for many reasons: religion's own violent past and present; the gap between personal belief and public performance, especially in the workplace; the disruptive potentials arising from diverse religious practices; the idea that the quest for personal transcendence trumps the necessities and requirements of work and profits; the rescaling and redesign of business organization to permit the open expression of religious belief and practice; accepting that spirituality and religion are a direct expression of genetically-based biological evolution; believing that civic/community citizenship should be openly associated with existing religious traditions; etc., etc. As already noted, Fort is fully aware of these difficulties while continuing to be hopeful that businesses will accept the material and spiritual gains he envisions for them and for humanity writ large.

Judging Fort's argument requires clear answers to the following sets of questions and issues. In each set of coupled relationships, one must decide whether the linkage is dichotomous/dualistic (a completely independent, separate distinction) or monistic (a unified, interdependent relationship). Put another way, do the categories reflect causation or mere correlation, convergence or simple parallelism, evidence or inference?

RELIGION --- SPIRITUALITY. Are they identical? Fort says the differences are inconsequential. Do they require a supernatural god and/or mysticism? Fort says no, referring to Buddhism and Confucianism. Religions embrace “a moral code and a mythology about nature and life.” Spirituality is “a naturalistic desire to connect with something larger than oneself that makes life meaningful.” This spiritual search incorporates an element of “transcendence” that “extends beyond ourselves” and which Fort says is necessarily indefinable.

PERSONAL PHILOSOPHY --- DOCTRINAL THEOLOGY. Can they exist independently of one another? If so, then a spiritual search for “something larger than oneself that makes life meaningful” might be undertaken without theological guidance. Personal philosophies reflecting a variety of values can exist *sans* theology. Fort acknowledges as much but implicitly seems to favor reference to broadly accepted doctrinal beliefs.

HARD-WIRED? --- CULTURALLY LEARNED?. Fort speaks of “the evolutionary propensity of human beings to embrace spirituality,” and asserts that “spirituality is a natural part of our genetic makeup,” that “religious belief is part of our evolutionary heritage,” and that religious institutions are “a central adaptive mechanism.” The supporting scientific evidence here is slight, controversial, and uncomfortably suggestive of other questionable uses of science, such as the notion of intelligent design and the anthropic principle. Social bonding, ecology-based community linkages, reciprocal altruism, and cooperative actions are indeed derived from and rooted genetically in natural evolutionary processes promoting human adaptation and survival. Parallel behaviors displayed in and approved by religious doctrines enjoy a rich and long history of cultural evolution with accompanying educational inculcation and indoctrination. Are hard-wiring and religious beliefs more than an historical dichotomy? Are preferred cultural belief systems simply being grafted onto, or misidentified as, natural phenomena? Does inference override evidence?

PRIVATE BELIEFS --- PUBLIC SPACES. Balancing one’s personal, privately held beliefs with the various demands and conditions of one’s social, public life is a common challenge. Laws, customs, and public attitudes limit the admixture of the private and public realms, varying with the history and traditions of diverse societies. Fort advocates the open, explicit expression and acceptance of (private) religious belief within the (public) workplace, along with organizational devices to make it feasible, so that religion’s moral values can influence a firm’s operations. Not made clear is how to avoid a tangle of problems arising from the presence of non-religiously committed workers, unequal organizational authority, gender implications, ethnic diversity, and contradictory religious doctrines, nor the implications for cooperative team efforts where such differences might be disruptive. Private beliefs, even religious ones, are indeed present in public spaces, as Fort points out. Do the potential moral benefits they may bring to the workplace justify their penetration into secular public spaces in industry, government, and civic life generally? Once again: Dichotomy? Or merger?

BUSINESS/COMMERCE --- ETHICS/PEACE. Fort's central thesis in this book and in his earlier peace-through-commerce book is that religious belief systems offer a pathway for business firms to become more ethical and thereby peacemakers. He perceives a parallel between religious principles and desirable business functions **as if** that parallel relationship should or could become fused into one operational whole. But, as physicists and mathematicians say, parallel lines never converge. Common traits need not produce identical or overlapping outcomes, however worthy they may be. Business's parallel direction leads toward economizing/productive outcomes. Religion/spirituality's parallel direction counsels personal morality and peaceful relations. What have we here—mere correlation or profound causation?

The United States, a nominally Christian nation, has engaged in 5 major international wars plus several lesser skirmishes over the past 100 or so years, not to mention its own earlier Civil War, and has played nuclear war brinkmanship with the former Soviet Union. Fort cites 10 other major religiously-engaged violent conflicts currently active around the globe. Not included in this global roster of warfare and violence are the current tensions arising partially from the differing religious traditions of Islam and Christianity. Tim Fort's radical thesis that the modern corporation can play a key role in lessening such violence and warfare—by taking the best that religion has to offer and making it the core of an ethical business culture—presents an alternative going beyond (literally “beyond”) such secular models as corporate citizenship, corporate social responsibility, and the virtuous corporation.

This review has presented only the barebones of Fort's richly referenced book, so take a look for yourself, and see what you think. As you do so, I leave you with one final question to ponder: If Propheteers and Profiteers exchange matrimonial vows, would you expect the union be an Unholy Alliance or a Match Made in Heaven?