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Abstract

A belief-based organization is a business or not-for-profit whose operating philosophy and practice is influenced by religious or spiritual belief. Organizations rooted in a commitment to Christian belief and life are plentiful in certain regions of the United States, yet this niche of belief-based organizations has received light research attention. We present findings from a survey of Christian-based businesses in the Fort Worth (Texas) and Wichita (Kansas) metropolitan areas, specifically focusing on two issues: How publicly these organizations express their belief basis and what underlying motivation exists for basing an organization on Christian belief.

Overview

The spectrum of literature on Christian faith in the marketplace might be depicted as an hourglass. Toward the lower, more micro end, a large and growing body of literature is directed toward individual Christians working in business. Many of these articles and books encourage Christ-like choices, leadership, stewardship, and balance at work. At the top end of the glass, a rich critique and embrace of economic systems has been and continues to be written. Although there remain many questions at both ends of the hourglass, it is the middle—at the level of business operations and practices—where the least amount of writing exists.

Although their exact numbers are difficult to assess, Christian-based organizations—both not-for-profits and companies—appear to be numerous, especially in regions of North America where conservative protestant church membership is plentiful. In-print and on-line Christian business directories point consumers to firms who advertise to Christians and/or promote themselves as belief-based.

Yet belief-based firms are not new. Similar organizations existed in seventeenth century Europe where a variety of Protestant groups—such as the Quakers, Calvinist, Puritan, and Mennonites—promoted the expression of faith in work (Williams, 1982). The Society of Friends supported many commercial ventures during British industrialization by providing its members with seed capital, advice, and accountability (Kirby, 1993; Prior and Kirby, 1993). These communities of faith catalyzed business growth through relationships of trust, personal integrity, and spiritual priorities rather than the personal accumulation of wealth (Casson, 1995). In the twentieth century North America, Christianity made its way into corporate forms and practices through both Protestant belief (e.g. Heidebrecht, 1989) and Catholic social teaching (cf. Alford & Naughton, 2001; Deberri, Schultheis & Henriot, 1992).

The purpose of our research is to gain an exploratory picture of businesses based on Christian belief. Specifically, we focus on two issues: How publicly these organizations express their belief basis and what underlying motivation exists for basing an organization on Christian belief. We selected these issues based on the guideposts of previous empirical studies.

Previous Studies

Although few in number, three empirical studies on Christian belief-based businesses point directions for additional research. The oldest known contribution is Ibrahim, Rue, McDougall, and Greene's (1991) national survey of 152 CEOs employed by Christian businesses. Because the researchers were interested in how employees were treated, Ibrahim and his colleagues limited their sample to for-profit firms employing at least fifteen individuals. The researchers found that nearly all of the firms (92%) had regular on-site religious activities (e.g., devotions, faith-infused speeches, references to scripture, prayer, etc.). Most (73%) actively proselytized among their customers and emphasized customer satisfaction (78%) and profitability (81%). Many (53%) financially supported Christian organizations. Ibrahim and his colleagues did not explore the motives for firms advertising their beliefs, nor the firm's commitment to faith if profitability was threatened.

Two recent, in-depth case studies provide some deeper insights into organizational cultures and subcultures in beliefs-based firms (Nakata, 1998) and spiritual growth by Christians operating in challenging business environments (Benefiel, 2002). In an ethnographic study of Daniel, Inc. (a pseudonym) Nakata (1998) examined the stated positions and *de facto* practices of a Christian, belief-based firm. Focusing on the firm's organization culture and its spiritual and commercial natures, Nakata identified a pervasively Christian organizational culture, but also eight subcultures, including male, non-management, and creative. Although some employees commented that business typically won when faith and business clashed, generally the company's religious basis appeared energizing and synergistic with its business performance.

Benefiel (2002) provides an interesting look at spiritual transformation of Reell Precision Manufacturing (RPM), a St. Paul, Minnesota firm that manufactures automotive springs and clutches. Using a three-part framework, Benefiel explores the deepening spirituality of firm leaders in the face of business challenges over a two-decade period. Benefiel's three-part framework suggests that prior to stage one, a seeker (or businessperson) might seek God for the gifts (e.g., business success) they might receive. At stage one, those gifts dry up and the seeker learns to listen and let God lead him/her. At stage two, the seeker discovers that the spiritual path is about transformation—they are led to ongoing transformation. The third stage depicts seekers learning to want God for Godself, not for any gift that God might impart. The leaders at RPM passed through each of Benefiel's stages. Benefiel's research adds depth to the study of Christian business, suggesting that there are varying layers and manifestations of spirituality in the same firm over time.

These three studies provide a rough sketch of belief-based businesses. But with such little research on these organizations, a number of research questions remain, including:

- How are belief-based firms defined and identified?
- Can a faith-integration typology be created to categorize various types of faith-integration at the business level?
- Do faith-integration practices differ according to a firm's characteristics (e.g., size, industry)?

It is to these questions that we turn our attention.

Manifestations and Motivations of Belief-Based Business

Belief-based organizational practice can be divided into at least two aspects: The expression of belief, and the impact of belief. Just as there are differences in individuals' expressions of their faith, some firms are more demonstrative than are others in their expression of faith. Some organizations clearly advertise themselves to be a Christian organization by displaying a Christian symbol (e.g., an *ichthys*—a stylized symbol of a fish—or a cross), a religious mission statement, or they may choose a name that clearly associates them with Christian faith, such as “The King’s Carpet Cleaners,” “Heavenly Touch Auto Body,” or “Christian Family Financial Concepts.”

Several reasons could exist for publicizing an organization’s belief basis. One is that owners see the firm as a tool for glorifying God. A firm might advertise Christian faith to be evangelistic, for example, or to acknowledge one’s source of strength, or to witness to an ultimate source of life. It may be that with the trumpeting of the loss of Christian basis in American society (e.g., Porpora, 2001), advertising may have increased force in repelling customers. Some of these organizations might readily acknowledge that such advertising may cause them to lose business from customers who are antagonistic or mistrustful of the organization’s belief basis.

The opposite reason may be a second motivation for advertising belief. Some organizational leaders may suspect that publicizing a particular belief-basis may attract customers who share those beliefs, or may simply stand for attractive qualities—such as trustworthiness in a plumber or electrician. This approach is not new. For decades, Shaker and Amish products were widely known for their quality (Andrews & Andrews, 1982). The Christian market (and markets associated with other belief systems) can be quite large. The Christian retailing market was estimated in 1999 to be a \$3 billion, 88 million-person segment (cf. Hanover, 1999). Displaying a belief-related name, motto, or symbol may attract customers interested in Christian products or customers wanting to support Christian organizations.

The line between these two expressions and motivations may be quite thin in some cases. When a business leader believes in a success gospel, the motivation may be sincere and moved by faith, but the belief is in an outcome of material prosperity.

A third—but we suspect less common—rationale for advertising a firm’s belief-basis is to emphasize the humanity of a particular workplace. This may be more common in organizations open to stronger institutionalist forces, such as adoption agencies, nursing homes, or kindergartens. In these highly institutionalized environments, Christian belief may communicate a high standard of care for people that may attract customers who don’t hold common beliefs personally.

In each of these cases, concern exists about whether an organization damages the reputation of faith or takes advantage of faith by co-opting it in such a public and utilitarian light. Motivations

are suspect when faith is used so publicly, in part for the purpose of garnering sales and attracting customers.

Various motivations and expressions of faith are depicted by Boje (2001) in his paradigms of spiritual capitalism. Motivations to witness, suggesting both profession and evangelism, fall under Boje's "Fundamentalist" rubric. The expression of faith—sincere or otherwise—for the purpose of promoting the business would fall in his "managerialist" category. And when focused on giving to others in service, a firm might fall under the "humanist" label.

The early stage of research on belief-based firms limits the precision of any hypotheses. Yet general propositions are needed to guide the formation of the next stage of research. We offer these without much theoretical or empirical backing, but merely as guides to the formation of research direction:

Proposition 1: Firms identified as belief-based will express their belief inside and outside the organization.

Proposition 2: The expression of belief will not be strongly related to the motive of promoting the business.

Our suspicion is that firms that publicly express a belief-basis do so largely because they the owners/managers are sincere in those beliefs. Those who fear that a public stand for Christian belief may weaken the business will tend to drop out of the population of belief-based firms and hold more privatized commitments to faith, both with employees and non-employees.

Proposition 3: The older the firm, the weaker its belief-basis.

Life cycle and religious commitment research suggests that over time, commitment to values tend to erode. One might argue that subcultures tend to develop over time, chinks in the armor of faith are evident to some as mistakes are made by belief-professing leaders, culture may secularize outside the firm, and financial wealth may increase laxity in belief.

Methods and Measures

Initial efforts in conducting primary research on beliefs-based businesses were undertaken as part of a Marketing Research class project at a southwestern Christian-based university. First a questionnaire was developed based largely on a study of Christian business people by Zigarelli (2000) to identify the attitudes, behaviors, and best practices of Christians in managerial and leadership roles. The specific survey items mapped to qualities suggested by Proverbs, the Matthean Beatitudes (Matt. 5:3-12), and fruits of the Spirit (Gal. 5:22-23). Modifications were made to Zigarelli's 88-item survey in response to the work of Nataka (1998) and McCormick (1994), as well as in response to discussions with authors of this paper, which reduced the number of questions to twenty-one. The questions employ a six-point Likert scale with no neutral response.

The research team compiled a sample of Christian businesses in Abilene, Texas, a city of 115,000, for a pilot study using two methods: (1) selecting every business from the telephone yellow pages that displayed a scripture reference, cross, or ichthys as part of their advertisement, and; (2) including any business from the advertiser list of the major local Christian radio station that satisfied a qualifying question. The qualifying question was simply, “Do you consider your business to be a ‘Christian’ business?” Of the ninety-one businesses in the sample frame, thirty-three responses were derived from a telephone survey. The results of this small-scale study showed strong agreement among the respondents, suggesting that a profile may exist describing “Christian businesses.”

To develop a measurement tool for the study reported here, further refinement to the survey instrument consisted of revising the earlier questionnaire in accord with the authors’ judgment. Based on ideas suggested by a literature review surrounding the topic “religiosity,” the authors speculated the two dimensions, *expression* and *motivation*, would be meaningful and identifiable in the study. Therefore questions were molded and categorized to reflect these qualities. The original arrangement was converted to a five-point Likert scale with an “I don’t know” response as a sixth option.

Questions were developed to explore a variety of aspects of the dimensions *expression* and *motivation*. The survey began with a qualifying question, “Do you consider your company to belief-based.” The instrument concluded with demographic questions that might give clues to a typology of faith-integration.

Next, interviews were conducted with three Christian business people who examined the instrument for clarity as well as content. This process led to minimal wording changes in a few questions. No items were added based on these interviews. The authors continued to refine the wording of the questionnaire as a generic beliefs-based tool for use among non-Christian audiences. Conciseness was also considered to garner maximum responses by requiring minimal time from the respondent.

In the current study, the respondents surveyed were the entire population of businesses advertising in two sources: *The Shepherd’s Guide*, a specialty yellow pages telephone book for Tarrant County (Fort Worth), Texas; and the *Christian Business Connection* web site (<http://www.galations610.com/>) which advertises Christian-based firms in the Wichita, Kansas area. Most of the firms in both lists appeared to be micro or small enterprises. A forty-item questionnaire was mailed to a manager in each firm to identify various beliefs-based practices in each workplace. Firms that do not claim a Christian orientation, but advertise simply to reach a Christian market, were excluded from the study.

Data will be examined by the use of three analytical processes. First, descriptive measures will be used to investigate the questions stated above. Specifically, commonalities will be sought that could lead to identification and definition of belief-based firms.

Second, factor analysis will be applied to the survey instrument. Scale items are expected to support two constructs. The authors anticipate one to reveal the firm’s form of belief-based expression. Our expectation is that expression of belief across firms will differ with regard to

how explicit is their practice. Therefore, a continuum between explicitness and implicitness of belief-based expression is expected. The firm's motive for presenting themselves as belief-based, in this study based in Christian principles, is the second expected construct to be supported in the analysis. This conceptualization can also be viewed as a continuum. One end of the continuum might be anchored by a motive for practices as a means to glorify God. Evangelism, acknowledgement of God as one's source of strength, or witness to Him as an ultimate source of life would be paramount. At the other end of the continuum would be a motive that focused on the firm is success. The expectation is that a firm could express a belief-basis to be identified as engaging in practices that are attractive to a robust customer base, as well as draw customers who share those beliefs.

Finally, analysis of variance will be used to explore patterns of belief-integration practices with various types of firms. Specifically, we will pursue development of a faith-integration typology of firm characteristics at the business level, and, exploration of relationships between firm characteristics and faith-integration practices.

Results

Results from the study will be presented at the Christian Business Faculty Association meeting.

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Dr. David L. Wright
Biography

David L. Wright is Assistant Professor of Marketing at Abilene Christian University.

David earned his doctorate at Louisiana Tech University and taught management at Eastern New Mexico State University and Arkansas State University before joining the College of Business Administration at Abilene Christian University.

Dr. Wright has researched topics such as learning organizations and market orientation.

He continues these research streams and is engaged in examining influences on student academic performance in higher education.

David has taught a wide variety of courses in management and marketing and currently teaches principles of marketing and consumer behavior courses at ACU.

Kimberly J. Roach
Biography

Kimberly J. Roach is an undergraduate marketing major at Abilene Christian University.

Originally from Abilene, Texas, Kim has been active in the McNair Scholars Program for the past two years, has completed research studies and presented at national conferences.

Kristyn Elizabeth Lynch Biography

Kristyn is a fifth-year senior at Calvin College studying Elementary Education with minors in Group Science and English.

She is from Long Island, NY and has been surrounded by diversity her entire life.

As a Christian, she has recently been convicted of her role in racism and reconciliation which has caused her to take active steps to begin the process in her life of going through the Healing Racism Institute last spring at Calvin and continuing to study the issue of racism on her own.

Kristyn is currently a Big Sister to a 13-year-old African American girl from Grand Rapids.

She is also living-in-community with other Calvin students in an all-Black neighborhood in the city of Grand Rapids.

These experiences are preparing her for teaching in urban public schools.

Lord willing, she plans to go back to NY after graduating from Calvin and teach in NYC.

She is honored to be involved in this racism research.

It is another way for her to learn about the effects of racism, what the Christian response should be, and how to act on that response.

Dr. John E. Timmerman Biography

John E. Timmerman is Professor of Marketing at Abilene Christian University.

Dr. Timmerman earned his doctorate at the University of Memphis and served as a marketing professor at the University of Tennessee at Martin prior to joining the ACU faculty.

Ed teaches marketing strategy, marketing research, and international marketing.

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