

CAPITALISM VERSUS SPIRITUALITY: Buddha, Shiva, Jesus and Mohammad Don't Stand A Chance

By John Nirenberg



In 1999, the tenth anniversary of the fall of the Berlin Wall, while the business press swooned with giddy proclamations of the sustained “victory” of capitalism over communism, and even proclaimed an end to the business cycle, a street battle closed down the World Trade Organization (WTO) meeting in Seattle, Washington. Organizers were trying to put the brakes on the so-called culture-destroying globalization juggernaut. But most of the world’s growing population still demands a better life; and it is capitalism, we are told, that is the only vehicle able to make that happen.

On the other hand, it seems that the advent of American-style capitalism threatens cultures everywhere as McDonald’s, Starbucks, and Hollywood create a bland sameness and undermine local sensibilities wherever they spread. It is for this reason that many people are concerned about the impact of capitalism even while enjoying the fruits of its creation.

Since the dawn of religion over twenty-five hundred years ago, we have been cautioned about the evils of excessive “materialism” and have been implored to moderate our choices to retain our true values, a pious way of life, a culture in service to the will of a higher power. Globalization reduces people’s ability to focus solely on living a spiritual life because it sweeps everyone it touches into a monetized economy that requires that we all work

in impersonal organizations to make a living. It isn’t globalization per se that is the problem. It is the economic system itself, embraced virtually everywhere today as the one true religion of modernity. It is the real culprit of culture change both here and around the world.

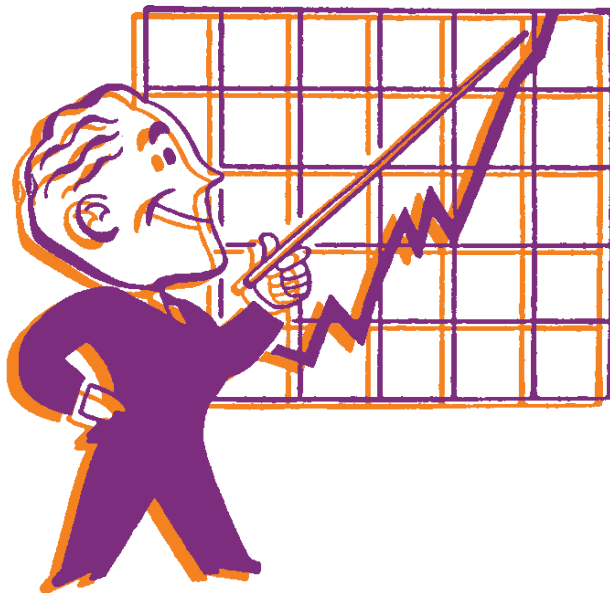
The driving force undermining confidence in the globalization phenomenon is the set of values and operating rules that make the economic system work. It is the uncanny symbiosis between people’s immediate self-interest and the fundamental rules of the game that places profit above all else that insidiously transforms cultures.

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The dominant economic model espouses free markets; minimal government, including privatization of all public assets and the deregulation of business; and the protection of capital via removal of corporate and capital gains taxes. It assumes (conveniently for those with capital) in this race to riches that disadvantages, weaknesses, and failures are due to the lack of individual

effort and the shirking of personal responsibility. The poor have only themselves to blame. In this new world, consumption for its own sake, financial freedom, and organizational power replace striving to become a good person, to earn salvation in the hereafter, or to find enlightenment. The money economy, and the need to be employed to make a living, make living a life in service to spiritual ends and philosophical beliefs increasingly difficult.

The current form of capitalism, and the attendant withering of the regulatory role of the state, is raising serious practical questions about how to maintain a spiritual life. Around the world people are asking how they can maintain the positive aspects of their pre-globalized lives with their own objectives for community stability and the perpetuation of shared values, harmonious intergenerational and interpersonal relations, supportive everyday social practices, and local



deliberative governance structures that have evolved among a diverse peoples to create distinct cultures.

While we seek ways to balance family and work, to be more complete persons, to live a life reflective of diverse personal aspirations and beliefs — one that allows us to reach our religious or philosophical ideal selves — we slip ever closer to a 24/7 commitment of our mental energies to our work, and our behavior increasingly reflects organizational needs and influences.

Analogous to this dilemma — of wanting the fruits of modernization in all their industrial and post-industrial manifestations but not their perceived shortcomings while being trapped in a web of systemic influences contrary to our spiritual needs — is an advertisement run consistently in recent years by Siemens. Perhaps you've seen it. In a fast-paced poetic singsong voice accompanied by MTV-like split-second images flashing across the screen, the narrator says, "If you want this," a cell phone, for example, "then you must have this, this, this, this, and this." Flashing across the screen are the technologies and industrial artifacts required to make cell phones work. The point of the ad, of course, is that Siemens is making all of the supporting technologies behind the scenes so we may enjoy the cell phone. But the lasting impression of the advertisement is indeed the huge infrastructure required for any of the wondrous artifacts to function.

Similarly, if we want antibiotics, air conditioning, music CDs, computers, the Internet, and a ferry to Staten Island, behind the scenes in our organizations the social infrastructure requires that we treat one another in the workplace like replaceable cogs, embrace individualism, compete with everyone, be obsessed with the bottom line, accept relentless personal evaluations of our worthiness to keep our jobs, and eagerly respond to

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the endless message to consume, to be fashionable, and for each of us to want more than, have more than, and be better than — YOU.

It also stands to reason that as we accept all of the means to achieve our desire for the ends of capitalism we also get a lot of the cultural fallout: first the demise of the extended family, and now, even the demise of the nuclear family, alienation, isolation, substance abuse, crime, and a host of other ills cultural

leaders sometimes attribute to globalization. In short, we have to take the bad with the good; it's all part of the same basic phenomenon. If we take advantage of the innovations and technologies of the high-tech world, we also get stuck with the consequences — the social conditions that result from aspiring to the lifestyle enabled by the technologies and artifacts we enjoy. Indeed, we cannot have the milk without the cow — and the hay — and the stable — and, increasingly, the bovine growth hormone — and the bull. For more on this, please see Table 1 for a sampling of the competing values of our spiritual/philosophical and organizational lives.

As globalization covers the world, communities' values and practices that include the ceremonies marking human transitions, the shared experience of survival itself, collective accomplishments, the compassionate treatment of young and old, engaging in mutual entertainment, and providing care for one another in ways that have a distinctly local flavor are being influenced by the economic model that is beyond our control. The unrelenting demands of economic forces that are now spreading through cultures like a virus also challenge the personal practice of religious and philosophical belief systems.

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Beliefs do not put bread on the table or shelter over one's head. Wisdom may generate compassion and understanding but will not heal the sick. A modern world is created through action; our splendid technologies have allowed us to enjoy comforts and conveniences that bring great pleasure. But technological accomplishments and our shared effort in their creation, originally born of community, ultimately led to organizations which, as we have seen vividly captured in *Dilbert* cartoon

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strips, propelled society into a new era divorced of durable, life-affirming traditions and subjugated persons and cultures alike to the very tools and management behaviors that made modernity possible.

So, is our embrace of capitalism and the technologies it has given the world culture destroying? Is our choice at this time only modernism versus wretchedness? Progress versus poverty? The

conventional wisdom tells us, "Yes, capitalism is the only system that works, so this question only implies a fool's choice. We have come too far to turn back now. Do you really want to give up that cell phone? And what would you get instead? Chaos, suffering."

The real question is not capitalism or poverty as the powers-that-be suggest. It is: *What rules of the game can we adopt to make our actions life affirming? What rules can we adopt for our workplaces that help us behave with the wisdom we are capable of fostering, and live our beliefs as inspired by Buddha, Jesus, Mohammad, Shiva and others?*

Twenty-five hundred years of enlightenment don't stand a chance against the holy war of materialism relentlessly fought daily with the smart bombs of radio, TV, and the Internet as well as newspapers stoking the myriad material desires of family and friends.

All of how we communicate with one another screams the mantra: spend money, be happy. But we never have enough, and we aren't.

Twenty-five hundred years of enlightenment can't substitute for our need to make a living by working in this system and playing by its rules.

In spite of the growing interest in bringing "spirituality" into the workplace — an emergent business fashion that has been flying just below the radar of organization fad watchers — the net result has been frustration,

because the rules of the game haven't been changed to enable people to be managers in a capitalist world while fully practicing their human values.

Thus, a group of Catholics in Chicago calling themselves Business Leaders for Excellence, Ethics and Justice, have, according to *Fortune* magazine, wrestled with the big questions such as when are layoffs justified? And, what is a just wage? But we haven't seen answers that consider humans over capital. We just seem to have more prayer breakfasts. The rules of the system simply militate against it unless there is a level playing field. But a level playing field can't be created without a government, as representative of the people, that plays a significant regulatory role on behalf of humans, not capital. Unfortunately, we have a dwindling number of such examples (three or four Nordic countries?) and even fewer successful examples that are powerful enough models to stand as convincing examples for the world to emulate.

Perhaps we will come to see the problem not as a problem of globalization but as one of the choices we make in every organization — to play by a set of rules that consistently places economic ends above human ends and require that

we value one another according to the money we make and the power we wield, seeing each other merely as means to an end. In that way, we reveal to ourselves that what is really important in life is not the niceties of a Sabbath or temple/mosque/church ceremony but the material rewards and the pleasures accrued as a result of our inescapable need to work for a living. Were it otherwise, spirituality in the workplace would result in changing the rules to reflect the fact that “people are our most important asset,” going far beyond organizationally sanctioned prayer meetings and discussion groups. ◇

Some Common Spiritual Values/ Espoused Ways of Life	Contrasting Organizational Values Lived Ways of Life	Accompanying Behavior or Structural Stimulus
Dignity	People as means to an end	Hire and fire at will
Compassion	Competition	Rewards are rare; zero sum game
Love	Unemotional	Scientific management and professionalism
Helping one another	Ignoring others' needs	Distance oneself from those who make errors, lose battles, get passed over for a promotion or are downsized
Service	Profit	Bottom line measures success
Stewardship	Exploitation	Externalize costs; freely consume non-renewable public resources; pollute
Mindfulness	Self-interest	Self-promotion impression management
Right Livelihood	Pursuing all opportunities	Someone needs to provide chemical weapons, land mines, guns and genetically modified food
Egalitarianism	Hierarchy	Kiss up, kick down; division of labor in an authoritarian structure
Respect	Domination	Pay lowest possible wage for highest possible output
Speaking the truth	Manipulation	Please power; withhold from colleagues; deceive subordinates

Table 1: Competing Values