

**The Contribution of Liberation Theology to the Development of Critical  
Spirituality:  
Industrial Mission and the Miners' Strike 1984-85**

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Abstract

In recent years we have witnessed the development of two marginal and distinctive interest groups within the study of management and organization. The first is concerned with critical management studies while the second concentrates on management spirituality and religion. Though both groups seek to establish themselves as forces that run counter to the mainstream of management studies the differences between them are more striking than any apparent similarity of purpose might initially suggest. Critical management studies (hereafter CMS) has become established on the basis of a commitment to challenge the structural inequalities associated with established managerial practices seeking to develop critical interpretations of management and to generate radical organizational alternatives. Management, spirituality and religion (hereafter MSR) has focused on the study of the relationship between spirituality, religion and organisation and on its relevance to management by concentrating on the development of understandings that go beyond traditional paradigms of research.

However, although both groups embody intentions of challenging the status quo of management thought and managerial practice by seeking to generate alternative, anti-positivistic perspectives their underlying theoretical commitments are fundamentally different. CMS draws on neo-Marxist, post-structuralist intellectual traditions with a commitment to feminist and post-colonial analyses (Fournier and Grey 2000; Alvesson and Willmott 1992) while MSR relies on the human potential movement, involving humanistic, transpersonal and positive psychologies combined with Eastern and Western religious thought and New Age spirituality (c.f. Giacalone and Jurkiewicz 2003; Biberman and Whitty 2000). This has led some to characterise the interests of the two groups as fundamentally irreconcilable, as different as black and white (Boje and Rosile 2003), the former being concerned with the dark side of organisations while the latter is preoccupied with 'seeing the light'. Yet despite these differences there have been some suggestions of a possible conjunction of interests between them with the aim of

developing a critical spirituality of management and organisation (Driver 2004), which begs the question as to what such a critical spirituality might look like.

This paper explores this possibility, drawing on liberation theology as a source of inspiration for breathing life into this project through provision of an active, practical theology which is intended to make a real difference in the world through solidarity and action (Gutiérrez 1973, 1999). Stimulated by experiences of oppression, vulnerability and marginalization, liberation theology relies on sociological, in addition to philosophical methods, drawn from the Marxist tradition, to account for the unjust consequences of the capitalist system. The paper also attempts to redress the notable lack of historical perspective within the MSR literature, being guided by a general concern that if the current business school preoccupation with spirituality is to be more than a passing fad it must be informed by history. To this end, it relies on the case study of the British industrial mission (IM) to illustrate how understandings of what constitutes critical spirituality may be informed by past experience.

As a movement which has provided pastoral support and prophetic ministry to people engaged in paid work through the mechanism of workplace visiting for more than half a century, IM is illustrative of a mode of engagement involving the religious sphere of the church and the secular context of industry from which broader notions of what constitutes critical spirituality may be discerned. The paper focuses on the role of industrial chaplains in the miners' strike of 1984-85, one of the longest and most violent industrial disputes in British history. Although there have been some accounts of the role of the established church in the strike little is known about the role played by members of the clergy based in the mining communities where the industrial conflict took place. This paper uses oral histories (Portelli 1998) of industrial chaplains involved in the 1984-85 miners' strike to illustrate the realisation of critical spirituality in a workplace context and argues there are lessons to be learned from these marginalized accounts that can inform the future development of this project.

Finally, it is suggested there are parallels between criticisms of liberation theology concerning the feasibility of the engagement between Christianity and Marxism that liberation theology seeks to promote and the recent hostility towards the development of critical spirituality within management and organization. Specifically, if we cease to characterise, or possibly caricature, religion as the source of delusional belief and instead explore its potential reinterpretation in the context of present experience, we can perhaps be slightly more optimistic about the possibility for development of critical spirituality in relation to management and organization. Nevertheless, it should be noted that the involvement of IM in the miners' strike illustrates how such a project may fail to result in any significant political or social change if such actions are isolated and restricted to a few individuals. Moreover, the contradiction between religious belief and one's ability to express or enact those beliefs in an organizational context can produce tensions which, far from being liberating or enlightening, are damaging and demoralising.

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