

The Research Agenda of Spiritual Leadership. Where Do We Stand?

Mariana NICOLAE¹

Irina ION

Elena NICOLAE

Abstract

This article aims at exploring the current spiritual leadership research agenda in order to assess its progress, limitations and practical implications for contemporary organizations and to reveal possible future lines of scientific enquiry.

This exploration is relevant as the development of the spiritual leadership research agenda shows the strong potential of the topic to become mainstream in the management paradigm of the twenty-first century. However, despite, the growing interest in the theme, the field of study is still characterized by a fragile position in organizational behaviour, low paradigmatic development, inadequate measurement scales and incipient empirical research. In this article, we also aim at understanding the major challenges that derive from the rising importance of spirituality, values and morale in the field of organizational behaviour, together with possible future lines of enquiry.

Keywords: *spiritual leadership, spirituality, organizational behavior, leadership theories*

JEL classification: M12, M14.

Introduction

Since its foundations, the leadership field has exercised an immense attraction for organizational behaviour specialists, but also sociologists, psychologists or business people. This is mainly explained by the fact that leadership is vital to the social, moral, economic, and political fabrics of society (Sarros, Cooper, 2006, p. 4), being in the same time a complex process, an exercise of social power and a moral effort.

Understood as a moral effort, the leadership field is currently witnessing the emergence of spirituality as an independent research topic in the more general organizational behaviour field. Meta-concepts that have been considered antagonistic meet in the arena of a more interdisciplinary and holistic research: business and morale, profit and spirituality, business action and religious values. The practical value of studying spirituality for the managers of the 21st century is related to their need to better understand human resources behaviour in a broader, spiritual and moral context, in order to further increase business competitiveness. In Asian, Arabic but also South Eastern European countries, motivation for this

¹ Mariana NICOLAE, The Bucharest University of Economic Studies, Romania,
E-mail: mariananicolae2004@yahoo.com

Irina ION, The Bucharest University of Economic Studies, Romania

Elena NICOLAE, The Bucharest University of Economic Studies, Romania

interest might have different roots. In these regions, religion and spiritual behaviour still play an important role in human behaviour, including business decision making. The emergence of spirituality in the organizational context challenges the traditional approach to science formed in the twenty's century. This traditional approach was mainly build on the separation of spirituality from the everyday matters of professional experience (Crossman, 2010, pp. 598). The inclusion of spirituality also brings with itself numerous problematic aspects, mostly related to measurement issues; more implications of the "cross border" positioning of spirituality in the knowledge generation paradigms will be further discussed.

One proof of the increasing importance of spiritual topics is that in 2003, the Academy of Management has created a research group dedicated to the interdisciplinary study of management and workplace spirituality. Another one is the impressive evolution of the number of scientific journal articles approaching spirituality. As Oswick (2009, pp. 16) shows, 3,257 journal articles on spirituality have been recorded on the Social Sciences Citation Index database since 1970, using a bibliometrical analysis. The development of the spiritual leadership research agenda, together with its emerging applicability for managers and organizations, shows that the topic "has the potential to emerge as a powerful and courageous innovative management paradigm for the twenty-first century" (Crossman, 2010, pp. 604).

In this context, we aim at exploring the current spiritual leadership research agenda in order to assess its progress, limitations, practical implications and value for contemporary organizations and to reveal possible future lines of enquiry.

With this aim in view, the article is built around four related sections. The first section "On spiritual leadership development" investigates the concepts of spiritual leadership, in the broader context of spirituality in the field of organizational behaviour. Also, the first section positions spiritual leadership on the map of orthodox leadership theories. The following section "Drivers of the inclusion of spirituality in organizational behaviour and leadership field" analyzes the factors that have supported the emergence of spirituality at the workplace, in general, and of spiritual leadership, in particular. The section entitled "Main empirical studies in spiritual leadership" concentrates on the main empirical studies undertaken in spiritual leadership. The final section "Conclusions on the progress and limitations of the current research agenda of spiritual leadership" draws the conclusions on the progress and limitations of the current research agenda of spiritual leadership. Also, it discusses the major challenges that derive from the incorporation of spiritual leadership and more generally spirituality in the scientific field of organizational behavior, together with possible future lines of enquiry.

1. On spiritual leadership development

Spiritual leadership paradigms were developed in the broader context of the incorporation of spirituality in the field of study of organizational behaviour. The underlying factors that have led to this trend are discussed in section 2, but it is worth mentioning that from the early '80s, the "new" leadership theories placed greater emphasis on emotional, moral and subjective values (Modaff et al., 2008, pp. 266). Since then, spirituality exercised an immense power of attraction for researchers, especially due to its novelty in organizational behaviour.

This attraction has generated a huge flux of contributions to the field, including in leadership. Thus, the first significant paper in the field of spiritual leadership is considered the article of Mitroff and Denton's (1999) – *A study of spirituality in the workplace*. In the 90's, many other authors have contributed to further initial developments, such as Fairholm (1996, 1998, 2002), Biberman, Whitty, & Robbins (1999) and Cacioppe (2000).

One definition of spiritual leadership, probably the most robust one, belongs to Fry (2003). He defines spiritual leadership (2003, pp. 694) as "comprising the values, attitudes, and behaviours that are necessary to intrinsically motivate one's self and others so that they have a sense of spiritual survival through calling and membership". Fry's model is based on intrinsic motivation, religious and ethical values, being built on the distinctive concepts of hope/faith, vision/mission and altruistic love. Two years later, Fry (2005) refined his definition, considering that spiritual leadership has the objective to "create vision and value congruence across the individual, empowered team, and organization levels and, ultimately, foster higher levels of both organizational commitment and productivity" (Fry, 2005, pp. 183). Other significant definitions of spiritual leadership belong to Sanders, Hopkins and Geroy (2005, pp. 40, 41). They define it as the extent to which organizations encourage and engage a sense of meaning and interconnectedness among their employees in both peer and hierarchical arrangements. Moore and Casper (2006, pp. 110) see it as an internal value, belief attitude or emotion, attaching it a strong humanistic dimension. Fry, Kisselburgh and Butts (2007, pp. 247) define spiritual leadership as a relational process aiming at constructing, coordinating and transforming self, others and the organization. Hackett and Wang (2012, pp. 880) describe spiritual leadership by attributes such as honesty, integrity, caring, compassion, humility, sensitivity, fortitude, temperance, love and faith. Those attributes make the spiritual leaders focus on the social good and end, and not only on the business end. Crossman (2010) defines spiritual leadership based on a series of complex and sometimes overlapping descriptors, such as compassion and caring, courage, generosity, questioning, service, stillness, peace and thankfulness. In our opinion, spiritual leadership refers to a style of leadership based on moral, ethical and religious values, embodied in the organizational culture and aimed at accomplishing both social and business ends, such as improving working conditions, decision making processes and motivation. The most salient characteristic of this type of leadership is that

managerial behaviour is justified by the simultaneous application of rational determinants and moral, ethical and religious beliefs. This view alters orthodox theories on managerial decision making, by including a spiritual dimension in organizational decision making process.

As stated above, many of the spiritual leadership attributes derive from world religions and ethics. This has made studies in leadership, ethics and CSR partially overlap in their research interest and methodologies. A positive result was that this overlapping has brought to both sub-fields of study a high degree of inter-disciplinarity. On the other hand a negative effect appeared. This was that the boundaries of the respective sub-field became more unclear and diffuse. In terms of religion, there is an obvious tension between religiosity as the source of spirituality and the paradoxical separation of spirituality and religion, by most researchers in their studies. Fry, Hannah, Noel and Walumbwa (2011, pp. 260) explain that the main reason for this segregation is that religion is more concerned with a theological system of beliefs and formalized practices and ideas, while spirituality is more closely related to the qualities of the human spirit. In our opinion, the main reason for this separation is in fact the widespread neglect of religion as a scientific object of study and the inherent difficulties to change this scientific paradigm.

The central constructs of spiritual leadership are derived mostly from other theoretical leadership models, such as transformational or servant leadership. Investigating these communalities in leadership theories is challenging, one reason being a generalized confusing terminology. The most common comparisons are between spiritual leadership and transformational, servant and transcendental leadership models. The transformational leadership style (Burns, 1978) is associated with the leaders' ability to successfully propose and lead organizational and personal change in an organization, being related to charismatic and visionary leadership. The servant leadership philosophy is based on the central idea that leaders exist only to serve followers, being associated to humility, spiritual insights, self-discipline and compassion. The transcendental leadership model is based on the Kantian principles of ethics. Significant contributions in the field belong to Cardona (2000), Thompson (2000) and Sanders, Hopkins and Geroy (2003). Sanders, Hopkins and Geroy (2003) develop a model based on three dimensions of spirituality: consciousness, moral character and faith, built on the emphasis put by the leader on inner exploration, rather than external factors analysis. They also analyze the relation between spiritual and transformational, transactional and transcendental leadership. In their opinion, transformational and spiritual leaders have in common the capacity of being inspirational, visionary and able to surpass barriers and limitations, but no differences are explicitly observable and/or discussed. Also, Crossman (2010) analyses spiritual and servant leadership, showing that both forms of leadership involve serving others in the organizations, based on a series of personal attributes: "both spiritual and servant leadership are characterized by intrinsically virtuous approaches that set out to cultivate a sense of love, hope, faith, holism, integrity, meaning, purpose and interconnectedness in the workplace" (Crossman, 2010, pp. 603).

With so many overlapping areas between the various leadership theories, we may ask ourselves if spiritual leadership is still a distinctive concept. One argument in favour of the distinctiveness of the concept is underlined by Sendjaya et al. (2008, p. 405). They argue that servant leadership puts more emphasis on “self-sacrifice and servant-hood moral values” than any other type of leadership style. Other arguments are generated by Fry, Matherly, Whittington and Winston (2007). They consider that spiritual leadership addresses a series of questions previously not covered by servant leadership, such as cultural values associated with leadership. Boorom (2009, pp. 5) conducts an analysis of the relationships between spiritual leadership and transformational leadership variables. His findings are discussed in the table below:

Table 1. Differences between spiritual leadership and transformational leadership variables

Characteristics	Transformational leadership	Spiritual leadership
Establishing the vision and mission & Intrinsic motivation source	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - the leaders’ charisma, that provides vision and a sense of mission, installing pride, respect, and trust - based on inspiration - communicates high expectations and expresses purpose in simple ways 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - the leaders’ and followers’ care and concern for self and others - based on calling - based on making a difference - life has a meaning for leader and followers
Stimulation of effort	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - based on intelligence, rationality, and problem solving 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - based on fostering the conviction, trust, and action for performance
Individual versus group membership	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - individualized consideration, fosters personal attention and treat employees as individuals 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - group consideration, fosters membership, but there is also emphasis put on employees’ appreciation

Source: after Boorom, 2009, p. 32

The two leadership styles discussed are built on different directions of thought and action, visible in the drivers of the vision, the mission, the motivation, the practice of stimulating effort or operational management, but also in the perception of the individual and the group. This synthesis clearly shows that, despite communalities, transformational and spiritual leadership are two different approaches. Similar conclusions can be drawn upon if we extend our comparison of leadership styles. Northouse, 1997 (pp. 134-135), cited in Beazley & Gemmill, 2006 (pp. 259), conducts a comparison between transactional, transformational and servant

leadership attributes. To this comparison, we have added the most prominent spiritual leadership characteristics, in order to obtain a better understanding of the four leadership styles. The results are presented in Table 2:

Table 2. Differences between transactional, transformational, servant and spiritual leadership attributes

Transactional leadership attributes	Transformational leadership attributes	Servant leadership attributes	Spiritual leadership attributes
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Leader follower exchanges • Contingent Reward • Management by exception 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Inspiration • Intellectual stimulation • Influence • Intrinsic motivation • Consideration 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Service to others • Principled • Stewardship • Spiritual values and beliefs 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Social ends • Business ends • Altruistic love • Membership • Calling

Source: after Northouse, 1997, 134-135, apud Beazley, Gemmill, 2006, p. 259 and the authors' contribution

Based on the most commonly accepted attributes of the four leadership styles, the table also illustrates *a transformative trend in leadership theories*. Spiritual leadership is an evolutive and improved style of leadership. It originates in the transactional approach, based on contingent and extrinsic rewards. It then transforms its fundamentals into inspiration, intrinsic motivation and spiritual values. It ends in an endeavor of equilibrating social and business ends, profit raising and altruistic love, under the form of spiritual leadership. In this metamorphosis, the effort put by the leader in the leadership act is increasing from one model to another, the spiritual leadership paradigm requiring the leader to be, himself, spiritually dedicated and involved into the management of the organization. As table 2 shows, there are essential and distinctive attributes of spiritual leadership, as compared to the transactional, transformational and servant leadership models. Spiritual leadership is differentiated by its aim of accomplishing both social and business ends, together with altruistic love, membership and calling. Especially membership, altruistic love and calling are unique concepts of spiritual leadership. They represent more of than the sum of moral, ethical and religious values embodied in the organizational culture. These values justify the simultaneous application of rational determinants and moral, ethical and religious belief in business decision making, making of spiritual leadership a unique managing style. On the other hand, despite its uniqueness, the conceptual boundaries between the three leadership styles compared are still weak. This is a symptom of the low paradigmatic development of spiritual leadership. The need to attach more importance to spiritual leadership models will in fact allow us to generate more consistent theoretical representations, but also to conduct better measurements of the concept.

2. Drivers of the inclusion of spirituality in organizational behaviour and leadership field

As stated in Section 1, the research on spiritual leadership is part of a larger phenomenon, that is the inclusion of spirituality in the organizational behaviour research area. The emergence of spirituality has been linked to the dissatisfaction with increasing materialism (Hoppe, 2005, p. 85), being also a response to “post-materialist” concerns (Majima and Savage, 2007). Fornaciari and Dean (2001, pp. 338) refer to this factor as to “the growing suspicion that the mechanistic, structural paradigm of the firm is insufficient in explaining and predicting human behaviour in organizations”. Ashmos and Duchon (2000, pp. 134, 135) explain the emergence of spirituality by a series of factors such as the growing wage inequality, the reengineering processes, downsizing and workers’ demoralization. Also, they point out the workplace being seen more a community, due to the decreasing importance of traditional communities, such as the church or the neighbors. Another factor is the increasing need to use more workers’ creativity, in a global arena of fierce completion; this a need is in fact rooted in other modern human necessity: work to be meaningful.

Other rationale that has supported the emergence of spirituality in the organizational field derives from the limitations of the traditional research paradigm in orthodox managerial and organizational research. The traditional research model has proven several times insufficient to explain and predict business and organizational behaviour. In the leadership field, we find a similar situation, in which core models of leadership are based on the Cartesian-Newtonian principles and rationalist philosophies of Descartes. Thus, the majority of current approaches to leadership follow a rationalist perspective in order to discover of universal “leadership” characteristics (Ford, Lawler, 2007). The main purpose of these approaches is to demystify successful practices of leadership and to replicate theme in companies or academic programs. But this endeavors are more consistent with early approaches to management, in their search for rationality, certainty and predictability (Ford, Lawler, 2007, pp. 409), and less adequate to the challenges of the 21st century organization, that develops in uncertainty and acts on bounded rationality. The described rationalist perspective on management neglected the importance of spirituality, as an explicative factor of organizational behaviour. This has lead to an incomplete understanding of this behaviour by researchers, managers and the general public. Some of the main reasons for which spirituality received almost no attention on the rationalist research agenda until recently can be related to:

- the modernist view that spirituality has no practical or managerial added value, being a non-materialistic concept (Sanders, Hopkins, Geroy, 2005, pp. 41);
- the opinion according to which a subjective topic such as spirituality is impossible to be studied using rational and empirical tools of modern science (Sanders, Hopkins, Geroy, 2005, pp. 41);

- the high difficulty of definitions in the area of spirituality, mainly generated by the “intensely personal nature of spiritual experience, being difficult to objectify or explain to others” (Konz, Ryan, 1999).

In this context, research methods were adapted to the rationalist, orthodox perspective, through the predominant use of quantitative instruments, pre-established hypothesis, technical rationality and an objective validation of the method. This scientific paradigm emulated mostly from developed countries, especially the United States of America. In this evolution, it imposed the biggest part of the managerial scientific and practical apparatus. But the continuing dominance of U.S. perspectives proved dysfunctional in countries described by different cultural dimensions than the American ones. Burke (2006) shows that mainstream leadership is built on the “robustness of the western world”, characterized by a linear and materialistic growth pattern. In his opinion, this has led to “the growth of an undisciplined form of self-interest, in which winning is all that counts” (Burke, 2006, pp. 20, 21). But, in Burke’s words, this is a philosophy not fully applicable all around the world. Questions related to moral values and ethical business decisions, especially in the context of transnational corporations affecting local communities, have attached even more importance to business practices and how are they managed. Also, the impressive development of some Asian countries, proposing different approaches to economic development and management gave rise to new patterns in the organizational field, with more openness to religiosity and spirituality.

Other limitations of heterodox leadership approach have supported the orientation of research to a more flexible and inclusive research agenda. One of these is the common understanding of leadership of something that exists already, instead of a dynamic, organizational and social process. This approach generates a static perception on leadership practice. On the contrary, leadership seen as a process that develops in a certain cultural context, or as a discursive construct, makes it open to be interpreted in various ways (Ford, Lawler, 2007, pp. 422), including in a spiritual perspective. Other simplifications in orthodox leadership theories that have made questions to arise are: a) the practice of over-simplified findings from complex data, many time caused by the inability to adapt research methodologies to subjective items and approaches, b) the underestimation of the importance of the context in which leadership is practiced and c) the mechanistic idea that leaders are active and followers are passive. The traditional leadership approach did not find answers neither to issues such as the increasing need to motivate people in a materialistic age and the challenges derived from here. All this empty spaces have prepared the field for the emergence of spirituality in the organizational puzzle.

Ardent and un-answered questions regarding motivation, decision making or business success have supported a process of evaluation of the validity of orthodox leadership research. These questions were signaling that leadership research and exercise needed a more subjective experience.

As an early response, in the 80's, leadership theories have started to include in their research agendas the study of moral, subjective or religious values, ethics and emotions. In other words, spiritual attributes of leaders. Some authors showed preoccupation with the application of different religions on leadership. Fascination has come especially from Eastern religious philosophies, like Confucianism and Taoism. According to the Tao perspective, leaders must both pay attention to interpersonal relationships and tasks and goals (Durlabhi, 2004). Delbecq (1999), based on interviews with Silicon Valey business leaders, recalls some core Christianity themes that might inspire business leaders. Some examples are the Christian "calling", seen to be in fact a calling to work, "that adds a sense of vitality and purpose to their leadership" (Delbecq, 1999, pp. 346) and the integration of personal spirituality in their work rather than a strict distinction between "their private life of spirit and a public life of work" (Delbecq, 1999, pp. 346). Carver-Sekeres (2008) approaches the evolution of American Christian business in respect of Christianity values. These approaches have resulted in time in alternative paradigms to leadership, such as the transcendental, the servant or the spiritual leadership. Interestingly, spirituality became a prominent issue of the workplace firstly for the American corporate culture and businesses (Sanders, Hopkins, Geroy, 2005, pp. 41), from which it was relatively missing in the 20th century. The conceptual and empirical studies developed in the nascent field of study are discussed in the next Section.

3. Main empirical studies in spiritual leadership

Spirituality at work is a double way concept, in which values, personal characteristics and interests are manageable simultaneously with the endeavor of profit raising. In our opinion, there is no room for the approach of spirituality at work in organizational behaviour outside the more general framework of business goals, like raising profits, surviving, extending or improving the customers' base. This is why empirical studies realized in the field are concerned with the demonstration of economic benefits of spiritual approaches. Based on an extensive survey of the literature, the main research directions in workplace spirituality and spiritual leadership include two broad research interests:

- the conceptualization, definition, measurement and operationalization of the "nebulous" concepts of workplace spirituality (Moore, Casper, 2006, pp. 110) and spiritual leadership;
- the analysis of the causal relation of spirituality with organizational variables such as motivation, stress, earnings, leadership style, setting purposes, the decision making process, productivity, absenteeism, turnover, organizational performance, share prices but also personal variables such as peace, joy (Fry, Hannah, Noel, Walumbwa, 2011), organizational misbehaviour (Weitz, Vardi, Setter, 2012) and personal and organizational change (Crossman, 2010).

The conceptualization and definition of spirituality and spiritual leadership is probably the most problematic and challenging task for the paradigmatic

development of the newly borne field. Nor spiritual leadership and workplace spirituality have a commonly agreed definition. This “perpetuates the conceptual fog and delays the progress of science” (Dent, Higgins, Wharff, 2005, pp. 641). It makes scientific rigor a difficult task, and research results with little scientific validity. The main source of these complications is in fact “much greater than mere conceptual fuzziness” (MacDonald (2011, pp. 199). This source is related to the introduction of spirituality issues in a orthodox scientific approach, based predominantly on a rationalistic perspective. The convergence science – spirituality questions implicitly the traditional research instruments. It also introduces a series of controversial binomials: positivistic versus hermeneutic sciences, quantitative versus qualitative methods, universalistic versus particularistic, objective research versus permanent researcher bias, in the sense of positive researchers’ expectations on spirituality (MacDonald, 2011, p. 199).

Regarding the measurement of the concepts, this is, paradoxically, relatively more developed than the concepts of the spiritual leadership paradigm. These measurements are based both on qualitative and quantitative evaluations. According to MacDonald (MacDonald, 2011, p. 195), there are well over 100 tests of spirituality and related constructs, like spiritual well-being, spiritual transcendence or self-transcendence. Some of these are related to individual spirituality, others to organizational spirituality. Moore and Casper (2006, p. 110) propose three theoretical constructs measuring workplace spirituality: perceived organizational support, affective organizational commitment and instinct job satisfaction. He proposes in fact a measurement based more on existing concepts, than on newly invented ones. He operationalizes the constructs by measuring self-work immersion, inter-connectedness and self-actualization. Another example of measurement instrument is Beazley's Spirituality Assessment Scale (Beazley, 1998, 157). It is used to measure the leader's spirituality. It consists of two dimensions: the definitive and the correlative dimensions. The definitive dimension consists of 11 items that measure the extent to which a person uses prayers and meditations regularly to express their relationship to a transcendental power. The correlative dimension measures values and actions revealing honesty, humility, and service to others, being formed of 19 items. Other examples include Sanders, Hopkins and Geroy (2005), that use the “Organizational Spirituality Assessment scale” and the “Organizational Leadership Assessment” developed by Laub in 1999. Kass et al. (1991) developed a measurement instrument, called “INSPIRIT”. It was designed to assess personal conviction of God's existence and the perception of a highly internalized relationship between God and the person. Ashmos and Duchon (2000) created the “Inner Life Scale”, using a 7 point Likert - type scale, including positive affirmations about spirituality. Another measurement instrument is the “Virtuous Leadership Scale”, developed by Sarros and Barker in 2003. It incorporates the five attributes of humility, courage, humour, passion, and wisdom, integrity and compassion, manifested in servant leadership and forming the base of moral leadership. Other measures include the character “Assessment Rating Scale” of Sarros and Cooper that is based on 12 character attributes: integrity, honesty,

organization loyalty, employee loyalty, selflessness, compassion, competency, respectfulness, fairness, self-discipline, spiritual respect, and cooperativeness (Sarros, Cooper, 2006, p. 7). Other measures of spiritual constructs are the Moral Sensitivity Questionnaire (MSQ), the Moral Judgment Tests, the Quick Empathy Scale, the Moral Motivation or the Behaviour Desirability Scale.

The other major research direction is concerned with the analysis of the causal relation of spirituality and a series of organizational variables. This analysis is generally built on the premises that there are positive effects for the organization from its association to spirituality. In practice, this assumption can be misleading and a source of a researchers' bias. The commonly agreed benefits of spiritual leadership and workplace spirituality are generally understood at three levels: societal, organizational and individual (Moore and Casper, 2006, p. 119). The existence of such benefits the one that has made that many organizations to have integrated spiritual perspectives in their mission and vision statements and business agendas, such as Amway, Ford, Memorial Healthcare System or Southwest Airlines (Crossman, 2010, p. 598).

Empirical research in this field has proven also prolific and there are many studies that indicate, on the overall, positive relations between spirituality on organizational variables. A significant example is the research of Sanders, Hopkins and Geroy (2005) that conduct a survey for 225 non-executive employees in one organization. Among their conclusions, their results suggest again a direct causal relationship between a positive, efficient leadership and spirituality. Allen and Cherrey (2000) and DePree (1997), indicate also causal relations between leadership and spirituality. Longenecker, McKinney and Moore (2004) conduct a survey of 1234 respondents trying to identify how religious values influence business ethics and decisions; their findings show a higher level of ethical judgment on behalf of evangelical respondents. Usman and Danish (2010) study the relationship between the spirituality and job satisfaction of 121 managers in the banking system of Pakistan. They find a strong and positive correlation between spirituality and organizational commitment. Word (2012) studied the theoretical links between workplace spirituality and job involvement, showing a positive relation between these. Fry, Hannah, Noel and Walumbwa (2011) also analyzed the impact of spiritual leadership on unit performance. They use a sample of military leaders for testing the relation between spiritual leadership and outcomes, including organizational commitment and performance. Their results showed a positive and significant link of spiritual leadership and organizational commitment, productivity and other measures of squad performance.

4. Conclusions on the progress and limitations of the current research agenda of spiritual leadership

The progress made by research in the spiritual leadership and spirituality at work is impressive, showing that a new direction of study is to be confirmed as one of the most challenging and important routes of research in organizational

behaviour. Most important, the development of the spiritual leadership literature has “redefined the role of leadership in organizations and suggested a relationship between leadership and spirituality in the workplace” (Sanders, Hopkins, Geroy, 2005, pp. 41). But, despite the burgeoning interest for this topic and its scientific developments, the field of study is still characterized by a fragile position in knowledge generation, low paradigmatic development, inadequate measurement scales and incipient empirical research.

One of the most challenging aspects of this evolution is related to the difficulties of studying spirituality scientifically. This translates in the need to rethink orthodox research approaches in managerial and organizational science, having vast implications on redefining acceptable and valid research methods and instruments. Methodologically, the spiritual leadership research involves a shift in research approaches, in the sense explained by Fornaciari and Dean (2001, pp. 347). They believed that both practitioners and scholars in management have now to accept the “evidence” about work spirituality, using non-positivist research methods, such as ethno methodological and qualitative techniques.

A better definition of the research directions in spiritual leadership could reduce confusion and increase the general perception and internal consistency of the field. As Oswick (2009, pp. 15) shows, there is a very limited systematic analysis of the level of growth, and general trajectory, of the academic interest in workplace spirituality and there are also limited insights into the popularity and prevalence of particular directions of spirituality in management (Benefiel 2003). Because of this, more reflection has to be made on the place of religion in the spirituality and organizational behaviour studies. Traditionally, the necessity of separating the concept from religiosity was underlined by researchers, based on the idea that “religion is, however, often described as a public and institutionalised process based on sacred texts, rituals and practices, whereas spirituality is seen as an unsystematised, individually interpreted, private experience” (Crossman, 2010, p. 504). This segregation from spirituality, ethics and morale deserves more attention in the specialized literature.

Also, a better understanding of spiritual leadership compared to other leadership theories is necessary if the concept is to move towards a paradigm status of value to organizations (Crossman, 2010). This differentiation needs more scientific investigation, in order to assess whether the research agenda on spiritual leadership can build further on its unique object of study.

Other line of research relates to the need to test more the construct validity of spiritual leadership approaches and models, taking into account that these were subject to very limited examination. On the overall, there is consensus that we have to adopt new adequate paradigmatic approaches for the conceptualization and measurement conceptualization of spirituality, in order to prevent research from trivial results (Fornaciari, and Dean, 2001).

Finally, the applicability itself of the spirituality related research is also a stringent topic. This is because it involves a problematic option - that of using spirituality as a managerial tool for manipulating public perception or employees’

behaviour for achieving profits (Crossman, 2010, Fornaciari, Dean, 2001). In this sense, there are almost no studies to analyze the potential negative side effects of workplaces spirituality, such as “divisiveness, discrimination, misuse and superficiality”, also possible sources of organizational conflicts (Crossman, 2010, Fornaciari, Dean, 2001).

On the overall, the line of research proposed by spiritual leadership is revolutionary and with profound implications on the overall field of study of leadership but also of organizational behaviour. For this, it deserves a more concentrated attention on behalf of the researchers, that could strengthen the spiritual leadership paradigm and also make possible positive effects of it in and on contemporary organizations.

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