The Complicated Trinity: Material Success, Religious Faith, and Human Goodness

POLECON 342 Final Paper

Paper Topic #1: Identify the major difficulties, struggles and barriers in finding religious and spiritual meaning at work. How might each of them be addressed?

Exemplars: Susan Warnke, Jeff Weiner, Valarie Kaur

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James Park

Introduction

> *"I am the Lord your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of bondage. You shall have no other gods before me." Exodus 20:2-3 (RSV-2CE).*

This is the first commandment because it's the hardest one to keep. It is also the hardest to judge. For as long as humans have existed, comparisons have mattered. Some people are attractive and experience a world that is friendlier to them. Some have innate athletic ability, giving them a chance to go pro. But perhaps the most complicated comparison involves material success—or, more concretely, money and status—because, theoretically, if one works hard enough, one can achieve it. Material success often becomes a statement about how hard someone has worked and, by extension, their character. It shapes how charitable, flexible, and ultimately how human we perceive ourselves to be. With the exception of Fabiana Yu and perhaps Samina Quraeshi (may God rest her soul), all the exemplars we've studied in this class have achieved exceptional material success. They could stop working tomorrow and still be fine. I categorize these exemplars into three distinct groups: the delusional, those rewriting their story, and the humble. To me, it's not productive to dwell on the delusional ones. However, the other two groups may offer valuable lessons.

Throughout my life, I have struggled to reconcile the idea that material success is synonymous with being a good Christian, and by extension, that being a good Christian is inherently the same as being a good person. We often think these ideas are synonymous. It's okay, for example, to work on a healthcare vertical AI startup—even if it puts hundreds of thousands of insurance workers out of jobs—because you can still go to church and consider yourself a good Christian and, of course, a good person. This is having your cake and eating it too. You're following the first commandment, but only by conflating material success with God's favor. Is that fair? Does God truly care about our material success, or is He more concerned with our moral choices? I believe it's the latter.

Looking at the exemplars who have attained material success, the delusional ones believe from the start that God has walked hand in hand with their work. Those rewriting their story backtrack and add God as a co-signer to justify their actions and choices. The rare humble ones, however, are honest with themselves. They recognize that their ten-million-dollar home isn't because God wanted them to own a mansion—it's simply because they wanted one.

This brings me back to the fallacy that material success equals being a good follower of faith equals being a good person. Assigning these three ideas as variables reveals six unique logical relationships:

- Material success = good follower of faith: obviously not true
- Material success ≠ good follower of faith: *a dissonance that is intuitively true*
- Material success = good human: obviously not true
- Material success ≠ good human: *a dissonance that is intuitively true*
- Good follower of faith = good human: contentiously true
- Good follower of faith ≠ good human: *a dissonance that is intuitively true*

In this paper, I'll explore the dissonances that I know to be intuitively true and highlight examples of behaviors that best reconcile these tensions. By doing so, I hope to shed light on the challenges in balancing religion and spirituality with work and offer potential paths forward.

Dissonance 1: Material success ≠ good follower of faith

Material success does not equate to being a good follower of faith. Someone whose approach best reconciles this dissonance is Susan Warnke. Susan fell into the "humble" category in my bucketing of exemplars. Through her research in *Workplace Fellowship Groups in the Bay Area*, Susan identified best practices that foster a respectful integration of faith in the workplace, such as refraining from proselytizing, promoting inclusivity, and avoiding deep theological debates. That's exactly how she ran Faithforce. Susan recognized that while business success and faith can coexist, they do not and should not share a causal relationship. Her own journey illustrates this separation. She initially struggled with sales, achieving only 1% of her quota, and her son developed complex medical issues. These challenges led to her spiritual awakening and growth. Susan could not, in good faith, attribute her latter business success to her conversion to Christianity, nor did becoming Christian guarantee her success. How would she reconcile the profound and painful reality of her son's medical challenges within a framework that might otherwise suggest such hardships contradict divine favor? I think Susan discovered that while business success and faith can coexist, they operate on separate planes. Professional achievements may serve as evidence of diligence, but they don't validate one's spirituality, just as a deep and authentic faith offers no assurances of material prosperity. This understanding allowed people who work for Susan to pursue excellence in their careers without conflating it with religious devotion.

The key takeaway here is to unlink work from faith. They can coexist, but neither needs to depend on the other. Not proselytizing plays a significant role in making this work. At first I questioned whether it was acceptable for Faithforce to refrain from evangelizing, considering that many religions say to do exactly that. Upon reflection, I think the answer is yes. Faithforce's approach fosters a space where spirituality can exist without judgment or pressure. Many religious institutions would likely appreciate any presence in workplaces like Salesforce, especially as attendance at traditional services declines. Simply bringing faith and spirituality into the workplace is a positive thing. Proselytizing, on the other hand, sends the message that a

person is incomplete until they convert, which inherently passes judgment on them. By intentionally avoiding proselytizing, Faithforce fosters an environment where individuals feel safe to express spirituality, lowering defenses and enabling faith traditions to coexist peacefully without fear of judgment or coercion in the workplace. However, even when following these best practices, a Christian might still feel their faith is intertwined with their work. I personally struggle with this daily.

During my time in the Navy, I consciously chose not to confront the tension between my faith and professional duties directly. I prayed morning and night and tried to live like Jesus throughout the workday, but my primary focus was on performing as a Naval Officer. I experimented with wearing rosary bracelets and openly making the sign of the cross at meals, but I wasn't sure if I was doing it to set a good example as a Christian or because I enjoyed the attention. Eventually, I stopped. The person who comes to mind as an example of someone who has resolved this tension is my college roommate Josh. Josh is a Christian and one of the most gifted and hardworking people I know. After the Naval Academy, he served as a Navy SEAL officer. Now, having left the military, he lives with his wife and two sons in rural Michigan, where he works as a carpenter. He even downgraded his iPhone to a flip phone. Josh is the only person I know who authentically lives out his values as a Christian while also working. This is a sobering example because Josh found the worlds of tech and consulting to be incongruous with his understanding of what it means to live a life like Jesus. Maybe he's right.

Dissonance 2: Material success ≠ good human

Material success does not equate to being a good human. However, someone whose leadership exemplifies an honest attempt to bridge this gap is Jeff Weiner. Jeff also fell into the "humble" category in my initial bucketing of exemplars. I believe he is able to be successful and a good human because Buddhism, with its inherent flexibility and emphasis on mindfulness, compassion, and ethical living, functions more as a holistic way of life than a rigid set of religious doctrines. This approach allows him to integrate core values into his leadership style. One of our readings, *The Art of Happiness at Work* by the Dalai Lama, highlights that the social climate at work significantly impacts job satisfaction, and cultivating good relationships with coworkers can make work more enjoyable. The Dalai Lama emphasizes personal responsibility in improving workplace relationships. These are valuable lessons—ones that could belong in any employee handbook—but it’s surprising to see the Dalai Lama endorse them. Jeff’s version of proselytizing is advising managers who report to him to take accountability for their teams' presence and performance. He focuses on coaching leaders to help their employees improve or align their roles with their strengths, rather than becoming frustrated by their shortcomings. Guided by his Buddhist principles, Jeff is able to confidently walk the tightrope between material success and being a good human.

In general, I think this dissonance is one we face most frequently. It's not easy to admit that we're not always good people, and we all want to be more successful, so we often imagine the relationship between goodness and success is symbiotic. But it's not. Jeff is at a point in his life where being a good human at work positively impacts his team, which in turn contributes to his company's success. Not everyone enjoys the luxury of integrating their personal values with professional responsibilities. There are many professions where one's character at work doesn't matter—as long as the job gets done, one is deemed effective.

For example, consider my father. He has never been able to hold a steady job, partly because he embodies the first dissonance—believing that being a good Catholic will make him rich—and more so because he is such a good person that he's often taken advantage of. He always ends up with the short end of the stick. My father is so kind—too kind for his own good. This kindness manifested in heartbreaking ways: he was scammed out of his life savings (which wasn't much) by an immigration lawyer who didn't have his best interests at heart. He served as president of his condominium for nearly a decade—a thankless role no one else wanted because it involved an immense amount of work and stress. He once worked as a contract driver for FedEx, taking on the worst schedules and delivering to the toughest neighborhoods because he thought it was selfish to ask for better ones. My heart aches as I write this. My father's genuine goodness has not yielded him any material success. Why is genuine kindness so often overlooked or even exploited? Must one compromise their principles to achieve worldly success? And what does that say about the systems we operate within?

Someone I look up to is Richard Feynman, the brilliant theoretical physicist who earned the Nobel Prize for his work in developing quantum electrodynamics. While a professor at Caltech, he was notoriously unreliable in administrative matters. He famously said, "If anyone asks me to be on a committee for admissions, 'no,' I tell them: I'm irresponsible." Instead, he devoted all his time to research. Kind people, however, cannot get away with such behavior.

So far, we've referred to being a good human in terms of Jeff's approach—an active one, where compassion towards others is paramount. But there's another approach: the passive one of selflessness. My father is selfless. He is a good human. But once we internalize both active and passive approaches, we can see how this dissonance is the most paradoxical. How can one be selfless while also striving for material success? My father's life is a testimony in the unsettling reality that genuine kindness and integrity do not lead to worldly success, challenging the assumptions we have too often about the rewards of virtue.

Dissonance 3: Good follower of faith ≠ good human

Your faithfulness to your religion does not necessarily make you a good human. However, someone whose work powerfully addresses this disconnect is Valarie Kaur. I was undecided

about placing Valarie in the "humble" or "rewriting their story" categories in my initial bucketing of exemplars. This uncertainty stems from a question I asked her in class: "I think of all the things that are true in my life that make me mad and that I bury so I can do homework or work on my startup. As someone who loves as their day job, how do you deal with all of the emotions?" Her insightful answer was to be curious about your emotions—"Oh my grief, what do you need? Oh my anger, what do you need?" She mentioned that historically, people played drums as a release for anger. Yet she also admitted that you can function for a long time with only parts of yourself—she did that for the first sixteen years after Stanford, years when she attended Yale Law School and began her career as a civil rights leader. Is it possible that Valarie views her entire life as being guided by her Sikh faith? If I had to guess, I don't think so. Her admission that she has not always been a faithful Sikh suggests a level of awareness and humility that bridges the gap between being a good follower of faith and being a good human.

Sikhism, like Buddhism, seems to offer flexibility, fostering alignment between faith and morality. If you're a good Sikh, you're likely a good person too. This alignment greases the skids for resolving the dissonance between religious devotion and human goodness. The Sikh faith is deeply inclusive. In the reading *Who Are Sikhs and What Do They Believe?*, a leader of the Guru Nanak Mission says, "If you are Hindu, be a good Hindu. If you are Muslim, be a good Muslim. If you are Christian, be a good Christian." Perhaps the best way to resolve this particular dissonance is to choose a religion that closely aligns with one's ethical values.

Regardless of the precise moment Valarie fully embraced her Sikh faith, her deep religious convictions have powerfully translated into concrete actions advancing social justice. Her Revolutionary Love Project and her work in prison reform exemplify how deeply held convictions, rooted in faith, can drive societal change and advocate for justice in broken systems. To me, the main idea here is to be unapologetic about what you believe it means to be a good human. In Valarie's case, that meant justice. She was unapologetic about justice. She saw that faith must move beyond personal salvation to societal transformation. It's a level of ownership rarely seen in religion—actively supporting institutional reform and directly aiding marginalized communities.

An extreme example of someone embodying this duality is Mother Teresa. Growing up, my mother had a large portrait of Mother Teresa in our house, and I eagerly anticipated her sainthood after being beatified by Pope John Paul II in 2003 (but by the time she was canonized in 2016, I was no longer particularly religious). Mother Teresa fulfilled the "good follower of faith" role by being a Catholic nun, but she was also a good human because of her selfless service to the poorest of the poor. She combined both approaches to goodness—active participation and passive selflessness. She loved in the way Valarie Kaur describes as the true definition of love: not a feeling, but the result of sweet labor. It is always connected to action.

Closing Thoughts

Is it possible to strive for material success while being a good follower of faith, or while being a good human? This paper has explored how being a good follower of faith and being a good human are nuanced concepts that sometimes overlap but also have subtle distinctions, which can create tensions between spiritual beliefs and ethical conduct. To be a good Christian requires an honest evaluation of one's motives and actions, ensuring that faith is not used as a justification for material pursuits but as a guide for how to live. It means actively embodying Christian principles—compassion, service, and selflessness—while resisting the temptation to equate success with divine favor. To be a good human, one must balance two approaches: the active approach, which involves consciously uplifting others, building relationships, and acting with compassion; and the passive approach, which requires selflessness and stepping back from personal ambition when it conflicts with the greater good. Balancing these approaches in the pursuit of material success is challenging but not impossible.

What does this mean for me? How will I confront the challenges of infusing spiritual meaning into my professional endeavors? I believe a good step forward is to follow the examples set by these role models, integrating their principles into my leadership approach and company culture to create a workplace that reflects both success and my values.

Inspired by Susan Warnke, I want to make my startup a place where people can talk about spirituality while ensuring that proselytizing does not happen. Achieving this will require constant vigilance and nuance, especially when deeply personal religious beliefs enter the conversation. I'll also strive to ensure my work aligns with Christian values.

Drawing from Jeff Weiner's philosophy, I will prioritize the well-being of my team members and ensure that kindness is not exploited. Like Jeff, I want to hire individuals who are compassionate but also truthful with themselves. I'll work to align my actions with what I believe it means to be a good person.

Valarie Kaur (and Mother Teresa) inspire me to articulate a clear vision for my employees and to adhere to it, even in the fast-paced environment of a startup where survival often hinges on financial viability. And when the time comes, I hope to be able to make a commitment to broader societal impact.

Above all, I will strive to think of my work not just as a means of personal fulfillment or financial achievement but as a collaborative effort with God, embracing the perspective Bishop Barron articulates in his sermon *The Enemy of Melancholy*: "When you go off to work—and whatever that is... think of this now as collaborating with the purposes of God. See it as a spiritual act, a moral act, an act that brings you into union with the purpose of God."