

BOOK REVIEW

Clayton M. Christensen et al. (2012). *How Will You Measure Your Life?* (London: HarperCollins Publishers), pp. 221, p/b, £9.99, ISBN 978-0-00-749054-7.)

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In the world of business where people mainly worry about measuring performance, Clayton Christensen, James Allworth, and Karen Dillon decide to unexpectedly ask an existential question: How will you measure your life? The reader is expected to infer from the title of this book that the measurement of intangibles is usually a problem. Neither the 'measurement of performance' nor the 'meaning of our lives' is easy to compute. That however should not serve as an excuse to dodge the importance of such existential questions. It makes sense to worry about organizational performance, I am tempted to argue, only insofar as that leads up to the larger question that serves as the title of this book. The conventional measurement of performance - despite its slightly existential aspect - is mainly animated by materialistic concerns (since HR metrics are used as tools for compensation management in firms) while the measurement of life is based on the human need to transcend the material world in favor of the spiritual realm of 'meaning' and the 'hereafter'. The reason that the invocation of an existential question might startle an unwary reader relates to the fact that business school faculty are mainly thought to be purveying the 'gospel of success' rather than the 'gospel of faith' at the Harvard Business School, which is for that reason often described as the 'WestPoint of Capitalism' (Cohen, 1974). I use the word 'faith' here both in the Christian sense of the term and, more broadly, as a set of existential concerns about whether the Sisyphean effort involved in succeeding in the corporate sector is really worth it (Camus, 1955, 1991). One way of making sense of this book then is to situate it within the genre of the 'cost of success' literature (Bartolomé and Lee Evans, 1980). While it is common enough to have faculty in the humanities invoke this argument in favor of moderation, what readers may not realize is that there are faculty in business and law schools as well who like to ask and answer existential questions about the relationship between success and happiness, the differences between material and spiritual values, and the need to cultivate a work-life balance (Kets de Vries, 1995; Friedman et al, 1998). These existential concerns however are not reducible to the professional concerns of psychologists who have to think through these dimensions of human endeavor; it also involves faculty in the mainstream of the business and law school curricula. They, interestingly enough, have started to worry about the fact that there is no place for the spiritual or the hermeneutic in American life (Carter, 1994; Kronman, 1995; Kronman, 2008).

What I mean by this broad assertion is that such existential concerns about

the meaning of life (and the role that educators can play in helping their students seek more in their education than just credentials and placement) arise within certain aspects of the 'hard' curriculum as well. So, for instance, not many readers will realize that a professor specializing in areas like technology, operations, and innovation like Clayton Christensen at HBS will be ready to go public with questions pertaining to the human spirit, or try to make connections between his work as a Mormon bishop, and his attempts to mentor students at Harvard and elsewhere. An interesting instance of this is Christensen's discussion of the challenges that his daughter had to overcome as a Mormon missionary in Mongolia, and those that he himself had to encounter as a young missionary in Korea. Christensen also has an endearing habit of invoking 'God' directly in his talks and essays leaving his audience wondering whether such an invocation is acceptable within the rules of the discourse of management. It is almost as though God were a 'euphemism' for an all-powerful albeit benevolent chairman of the board who is not obsessed with quarterly results and will therefore be willing to engage with thought leaders from HBS. This is not unlike Albert Einstein's preoccupation with whether or not God 'plays dice with the universe' since such a preoccupation has implications for a theory of causality. Christensen's definition of theory, for instance, is related to the attempt to overcome the structural paucity of data about the future as opposed to the past though it must be said that he does not invoke God as an Aristotelian first cause, but only as a figure who might 'interview' him during the Last Judgment. Christensen's God however is not preoccupied with 'faith' and 'work' as forms of existential justification. What He (God/Christensen) is preoccupied with is 'Justification by Situation Analysis'. The main task that the business professor is confronted with is teaching decision making in the context of situations that arise in HBS-type business cases. This is the God to whom Christensen finds himself talking all the time (the God of the Case Method). It might also be instructive to compare Clayton Christensen with John Milton. Milton's theodicy is an attempt to 'justify the ways of God to Man'. Christensen's theodicy however is the attempt to explain the ways of Christensen to God. The locus of explanation is the convergence of cognitive style and existential values of a decision maker in the act of decision making. This locus however is specific to a situation, and gives God a chance to size up and situate the situation analyses of a decision maker. The notion of 'measure' in the title of this book then is an attempt to understand the existential inadequacy of conventional measures on the Day of Last Judgment. To believe that material measures of organizational performance would be adequate to the task would for Christensen be a form of eschatological naïveté. The main task of this book is to save readers precisely from such forms of naïveté.

Interestingly enough, Christensen is not the only HBS faculty who talks openly about his faith with a candor that will take the reader by surprise. To understand this tradition of discourse, we must remember that even Kim Clark, who had served as Dean of HBS (before Jay Light), decided to leave Harvard

to take up the presidency of Brigham Young University at Idaho because he was requested to do so by the President of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints. Christensen, not surprisingly, is the Kim Clark Professor at HBS, and a worthy successor to Kim Clark who taught in areas that Christensen has made his own. Christensen himself did his undergraduate degree in economics at Brigham Young University in Salt Lake City, Utah before proceeding to study further at Oxford and Harvard. It is therefore important to understand the role that his Mormon faith plays in his life and thought processes (Christensen, 2012). The Mormon Church – for those who may not know - is an extremely successful Christian denomination in the United States that is centred at Salt Lake City, Utah, and was founded by a prophet named Joseph Smith in the 19th century. The belief system of the Mormons relates to the Book of Mormon. The Mormon faith has produced a large number of professionals in a whole range of artistic and scientific professions. Mormons are well-known for being able to balance their religious affiliation to the church without compromising on their professional standards despite the fact that most of them take two years off from their careers, as young men and women, to serve as missionaries in different parts of the world, and pay tithes on their annual income to the church throughout their life. The best known Mormon in recent times, needless to say, is Governor Mitt Romney of Massachusetts who was the republican candidate for the presidency in the recent US elections.

Christensen himself has written about his career in the Church including an incident in this book where he bemoans being passed over for a leadership position. As Christensen points out, the main reason for his disappointment was the fact that he was anxious to ‘strengthen’ the church by taking up a leadership responsibility despite his onerous schedule at HBS. A great deal of the argument in this book on the need to lead an ethical life, along with the ability to attain clarity about one’s own values, and the requirement to deport oneself with the ‘ideal of kindness’, are actually attempts to sublimate the ideals of the Mormon Church. It is well-known for instance that Mormons traditionally have large families and prize family attachments as an end in itself. Christensen and his wife Christine had a number of siblings in their respective families and raised five children together when they decided to set up a family. Understanding the do’s and don’ts of raising children (and getting them to internalize a work and problem solving ethic) is therefore a key theme in this book; it would not be an exaggeration to say that raising ‘great kids’ (who will go on to live a life of integrity) is tantamount in this world-view to raising good citizens for America. The biblical injunction to ‘go ye forth and multiply’ is an ideal that a number of Church denominations take seriously, and Christensen’s ruminations on raising kids in this book is a polite translation of these beliefs. One of the reasons cited for the professional success of Mormons (in the American media) is the fact that they eschew bad habits, and have a number of paternal attachments related to the excellent work that Mormon

bishops do in leading the community without getting paid to do so. Whether the protestant faith and work ethic had anything to do with the historical rise of capitalism in Western Europe or not, it appears that the Mormon Church is certainly a causative factor in the success of not only professors like Kim Clark and Clayton Christensen at HBS, but of Mormons as a community in the US. Christensen's desire to restore the family as the locus of character building in society, and his attempt to work through a model for the intergenerational transmission of ethical values both within and outside the Mormon faith, is a secular rendition of what are essentially Mormon values in a nation that is largely characterized by nuclear families, the outsourcing of child rearing, and increasingly fragile marriages.

There is something poignant about this attempt at transmitting values across generations since Christensen is not unaware of the materialistic contexts in which he and his co-authors find themselves both at the business school and in society at large. The main existential challenge for Mormons like him then is whether it is indeed possible to live by the values of the Church without being infected by the cynicism and materialism of contemporary society. If it is, the ability to do so is related to a form of spiritual exercise that Christensen practiced as a Rhodes Scholar at Oxford. He relates that while the econometric techniques that he picked up at Oxford still come of use a few times a year, his reading of the Bible and the prayer sessions for which he had to find the time from his study schedule not only are of use every single day, but have above all, kept him safe in the world. It is to this process of spiritual clarification that this book is dedicated; he hopes that readers who emulate its ethos will also be able to live a life – as he has attempted to do - of integrity. This quest for integrity however is not the attempt to merely institute an ideal since any serious attempt to realize such an ideal must proceed from understanding why there is so much 'frustration and failure' in the world of business. The object of the spiritual clarification then for Christensen and his co-authors relates to the fact that (in Peter Drucker's formulation) 'business purpose and business mission are so rarely given adequate thought'. This book is an attempt then to help readers to make up for this inadequacy, and thereby reduce the frustration and failure that results when we invoke materialistic measures as both necessary and sufficient in the attempt to make sense of our lives.

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