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**Transcendence, symbolism and order:**

**Towards a philosophical spirituality of organization in the footsteps of Plato and Eric Voegelin**

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**Tuomo Peltonen**

**Åbo Akademi University, Finland**

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## Abstract

There is an evident lack of rigorous frameworks for making sense of the role and status of spirituality and religion in organizations and organizing, in particular from the perspective of spiritual philosophies of the social. This paper suggests that the philosophies of Plato and his modern follower, political theorist Eric Voegelin (Erich Vögelin) could offer a viable perspective for understanding organizational spirituality in its metaphysical, political and ethical contexts. Essential for such a philosophical reflection is the postulation of the transcendental realm as the ultimate reality that provides the fullest templates for order, knowledge and ethicality. It is argued, in the footsteps of Voegelin, that modern organizations and modern organization theory should seek to re-awaken the lost experiences of the divine Beyond by re-animating religious symbols and myths of transcendence as devices for a spiritually opened consciousness.

## Spirituality and organization and the space for philosophical spirituality

Reflection on the role of spirituality in organizations and organizing has been growing exponentially during the 2000's (Poole, 2008; Pandey & Gupta, 2008; Benefiel, Fry, & Geigle, 2014). With a specific niche within the broad field of management and organization studies, inquiry into spirituality and religion has come to be recognized in the academic debates and structures as a topic in its own right, as demonstrated for example by the interest group within Academy of Management devoted to the study and practice of management, spirituality and religion.

Yet at the same time, what exactly constitutes the object of interest for organizational spirituality scholarship and how it should be theorized remains something of an enigma

(Case & Gosling, 2012; Benefiel, 2003; McKee, Mills & Driscoll, 2008; Giacalone & Jurkiewicz, 2003). Broadly speaking, it is possible to sketch three major approaches to the nature of spirituality (and religion) in organizational life (Peltonen, 2017). Firstly, those following a rationalist-objectivist stance (Burrell & Morgan, 1979) focus on the spirituality and religion as a measurable variable affecting and being affected by various organizational phenomena (Mitroff & Denton, 1999; Karakas, 2008; Fry, 2003; Giacalone & Jurkiewicz, 2004). Spirituality is here understood as an exogenous variable or mechanism in the causal dynamics of organizational processes. Secondly, spirituality and religion could be viewed as an intrinsic property of the socio-psychological landscape of organizational life. Here, the focus moves to the meaning of spirituality as experienced and enacted in the constitution of organizational and personal reality. In psychology, the inquiry into spirituality would follow the pragmatist or phenomenological program initiated by James (1901), for whom religion "…[was] the feelings, acts, and experiences of individual men in their solitude, so far as they apprehend themselves to stand in relation to whatever they may consider the divine" (James, 1901, 31–32). In sociology, in turn, the role of the religious would be interpreted in the footsteps of Durkheim (1912), who understood religiousness as eminently social phenomena that reflected and reproduced the cosmological structure of collective myths and rituals giving raise to socio-cultural order. Both Jamesian psychology and Durkheimian structuralism approaches spirituality and religiousness as an endogenous part of the socio-psychological reality, paving way for an interpretative study of religious experiences and communities.

However, there is a third way of interrogating spirituality and religion. Here, spirituality is not seen as an exogenous variable neither an endogenous modality, but something constituting a metaphysical basis for a spiritualized ontology and epistemology of organizations and organizing. This could be called, in absence of a better term, a

*philosophical spirituality*: a commitment to a spiritual metaphysics that assigns to a religious or transcendental reality a priority over the material, empirical and immanent realm of social, political and cultural dynamics. At the center of this approach is the other-worldly realm of gods or God, the ultimate reality valorizing the lower forms of intelligence and existence. Spiritual philosophizing finds its strongest advocates in the tradition initiated by Plato (1993; Klosko, 2006), and carried forward by his followers within the philosophical school of Neoplatonism (Remes, 2006; O'Meara, 2005), and, further, by the many thinkers, theologians and theorists who have conveyed Platonist metaphysics into modern discussions (e.g. Murdoch, 1994; Voegelin, 1952).

Majority of the scholarly debates on organizational spirituality and religion could be located within the first two perspectives. There is a growing corpus of works exploring the exogenous role of spirituality in the development of a happier and healthier workplace (Karakas, 2010). At the same time, the studies interpreting spirituality and religion as an emerging way of life within and around organizations are beginning to establish a position within the corpus (e.g. Lips-Wiersma & Mills, 2002; Case & Gosling, 2012), with the help of the rich legacy of organizational symbolism and interpretative approach (e.g. Kostera, 2008; Kostera, 2012; Bowles, 1989).

At the same time, the third perspective, adopting a philosophical spirituality, has not been as rigorously discussed as the two other modes. The calls for a more metaphysical or divine-based theories of spirituality (Steingard, 2005; Sandelands, 2003) have not yet developed into philosophically informed programs that would extend from the metaphysical issues into the domain of organizing, leading and governing. The purpose of this article is to advance the understanding of organizational spirituality as a Platonist metaphysics of the transcendental in its implications for a reformed theory of order, ethicality and soulfulness of organizational being and action. This is accomplished in

three steps: the second section of the paper discusses the relative absence of a Platonist spiritual philosophy in light of the historical development of organization theory. The third part of the article reconstructs the main spiritual elements of Plato's metaphysics of Forms, and the formation and rule of the Philosopher-King, followed by section that introduces of a modern appropriation of the Platonist tradition in the political-philosophical work of Eric Voegelin. The paper closes with a concluding discussion about the implications of a Platonist-Voegelian perspective for a philosophized study of organizational spirituality and its symbolic and narrative expressions.