

# Spirituality and Strategic Leadership: The Influence of Spiritual Beliefs on Strategic Decision Making

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**Abstract** This work extends the consideration of spirituality and leadership to the field of strategic leadership. Future development in the field of spirituality and leadership will depend on greater clarity concerning the level of analysis, and will require a distinction between personal and collective spirituality. Toward that end, a framework is proposed that describes how the personal spiritual beliefs of a top level leader operate in strategic decision making like a schema to filter and frame information. This function is mediated by the leader's constructive development and meta-belief and moderated by the organizational context and leadership style. This framework provides a starting point for considering the many expressions of spirituality in organizations and serves as a foundation for a multi-level theory of spirituality and leadership.

**Keywords** Spirituality · Strategic leadership · Spiritual beliefs · Decision making · Schema · Level of analysis

## Introduction

Workplace spirituality has been a popular topic in the academic community over the last decade or more, as evidenced by the number of books, articles, and conferences on the topic (Biberman 2003; Gotsis and Kortezi 2007). Acknowledging the importance of the topic for

leaders, both the International Academy of Business Disciplines and the Academy of Management have created special interest groups on spirituality and leadership (Biberman 2003), and in 2005 there were reportedly 30 MBA programs offering courses in spirituality in the workplace for future leaders (Marques et al. 2005). Yet despite widespread interest in the topic, very few articles exploring the intersection of spirituality and leadership have specifically addressed strategic leadership.

The study of strategic leadership is concerned with the top level leaders of an organization (Phillips and Hunt 1992). According to some authors, organizations are a reflection of their top leaders (Boal and Hooijberg 2001; Hambrick and Mason 1984), making the spirituality of top leaders highly relevant, and the shortage of literature integrating strategic leadership and spirituality even more significant. The purpose of this article is to extend the consideration of spirituality and leadership to the field of strategic leadership, offering a framework for understanding the influence of a strategic leader's personal spiritual belief on strategic decision making.

## Obstacles to Integration

Before considering how the field of strategic leadership could benefit from the discussion of spirituality in the workplace, it is worth examining why there has been little work integrating the two fields. Such an examination may shed light on unique challenges in this field, and give insight on how to proceed in future research. This author asserts that three dynamics have contributed to the lack of integration between strategic leadership and spirituality: lack of clarity regarding the level of analysis, a focus on the interpersonal aspects of spirituality, and the dangers inherent in examining spirituality and leadership.

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### *Level of Analysis*

A review of the literature on spirituality and leadership reveals a lack of consistency and a widespread lack of consideration for the level of analysis in relation to spirituality and leadership. While some authors treat spirituality as an individual phenomenon (Ashforth and Pratt 2003), others describe it as an organizational dynamic (Mitroff and Denton 1999). Spirituality is sometimes treated as a very personal endeavor in which the organization merely enables the expression of spirituality, while at other times the organization is described as having its own spiritual values in a way that parallels organizational culture or mission (Ashforth and Pratt 2003). Some authors have asserted that "...every entity, individual or group, has a spirit" (Marques et al. 2005). Such variety highlights the need for clarity about *whose* spirituality is under consideration, and at *what level* of the organization it is being studied. Toward that end, in the current article the spiritual belief of the leader is under examination at the top level of leadership.

The goal of a precise level of analysis is not to suggest a universal approach, but rather to clarify the starting point. As the field of spirituality and leadership moves from theory to measurement, clarity of constructs and levels of measurement will be critical. While some authors have attempted to be more precise in their use of terms (e.g., Dehler and Welsh 2003), there is a need for more precision throughout the field.

This wide variation in the level of analysis for spirituality and leadership may partially explain the absence of literature on spirituality and strategic leadership. It is possible that the failure to specifically examine spirituality at the strategic leadership level could be merely a symptom of the larger failure to consider the level of analysis at all. But because of the qualitatively different nature of strategic leadership, theories of leadership developed for lower levels do not necessarily apply to strategic leaders (Day and Lord 1988). For that reason, this article specifically attempts to develop a framework for understanding how a leader's personal spiritual beliefs influence strategic decision making.

At a minimum, there needs to be transparency about the use of terms. For example, while the term *spirituality* has traditionally been used in leadership literature to describe both individual and organizational experiences, the field has developed to the point that more specific terminology is needed to facilitate differentiation in levels of analysis. In this paper, the term *spiritual belief* will be used to denote the expression of spirituality at the individual level. Other terms, such as *collective spirituality* could be used to refer to spirituality at a collective or organizational level. This author challenges others who wish to expand the literature in this field to use terms that specify their level of analysis. The eventual development of a multi-level theory of

spirituality and leadership incorporating leader spiritual belief, follower spiritual belief, and the collective spirituality of the organization will be dependent on the field's ability to distinguish these as separate ideas (Klein et al. 1999).

### *Interpersonal Versus Directional Leadership*

Researchers and authors who have written about spirituality and leadership have tended to emphasize the interpersonal aspects of leadership (e.g., motivation, employee satisfaction, and empowerment) (Fry 2003; Milliman et al. 2003). From these products of spirituality, some have argued, spiritual organizations may find a strategic advantage (Marques et al. 2005; Mitroff and Denton 1999). Gotsis and Kortezi (2007) referred to these as "consequential" approaches to workplace spirituality. In their review of possible interdisciplinary links to workplace spirituality, Giacalone and Jurkiewicz (2003) identify 13 possible areas of connection between existing organizational research and spirituality. Nearly all of them relate to employee motivation, commitment, ethics, self care, and the creation of a sense of meaning for employees. Strategic leadership, strategic decision making, and organizational direction are not listed as possible points of connection.

The assumption that spirituality is concerned primarily with improved interpersonal relationships and employee satisfaction may help explain why few connections have been made between spirituality and strategic leadership. While the influence of strategic leaders by no means excludes leader-follower relations, strategic leadership is more focused on organizational direction and mission (Boal and Hooijberg 2001; House and Aditya 1997). Assumptions regarding the influence of spirituality may have slowed research and theory building in this area.

The information to which strategic leaders attend and the perspective they take on the organizational context can be critical to the organization's future (Cannella and Monroe 1997; Levy 2005). If in fact organizations are reflections of their top leaders, then the nature and influence of a leader's spiritual beliefs are important for understanding how that leader functions in the role of strategic leader. There is currently no framework for understanding how a leader's personal spiritual belief influences strategic decision making. That is the purpose of this article.

### *Potential Dangers in Examining Spirituality*

Finally, there is an inherent danger in the examination of personal belief and strategic leadership. Some have argued that corporate spiritualism runs the risk of overstepping into a coercive relationship with employees (Nadesan 1999;

Tourish and Pennington 2002; Goodier and Eisenberg 2006). In the United States, the discussion is further complicated by the very real risk, particularly in public workplaces, that the promotion of workplace spirituality might run afoul of an individual employee's constitutional right to the free exercise of religion (Rhodes 2003; White 2003). The literature on spirituality and leadership often has differentiated between spirituality and religion, presumably to avoid the appearance of promoting one religion (Giacalone and Jurkiewicz 2003; Mitroff and Denton 1999). Yet others have argued that this differentiation between spirituality and religion may actually exclude those whose spiritual beliefs happen to be religious in nature (Hicks 2002). In short, there are legal, ethical, and cultural limits on what researchers and leaders can impose or prescribe when it comes to spirituality and religion in the workplace. Navigating these limits can be delicate at times and may have discouraged researchers from exploring spirituality and strategic leadership.

To be clear, it is not the intent of this work to define which spiritual beliefs are preferred or disfavored. The framework proposed herein does not envision an intervention or spirituality program as some previous authors have imagined. Rather, the goal of this paper is to create a framework for discussion, thought, and study about the influence spiritual beliefs already exert in organizational decision making, and to offer a noncoercive way of describing how and under what condition those beliefs might provide strategic advantage to an organization. In this way, this work shares a similar goal with Hicks (2002) who argued that the emerging field of spirituality and leadership should focus on building organizations that can effectively negotiate religious (and spiritual) diversity, rather than imposing one view of the optimal spirituality.

In response to these three dynamics, this work approaches the nexus of spirituality and leadership from a unique perspective. The level of analysis is strategic or top level leadership, and the subject under examination is the personal spiritual beliefs those leaders hold. The question guiding this work is: "How do the individual spiritual beliefs of a strategic leader affect his or her decision making?" The goal is to propose a framework for understanding how individual spiritual beliefs influence the decision making of strategic leaders. This is the approach Giacalone and Jurkiewicz (2003) called for: to "immerse" the examination of spirituality and leadership into the already developed field of strategic leadership, thus creating a possible foundation for future development of a multi-level theory of spirituality and leadership.

## Definitions

Since this work approaches the topics of spirituality and leadership from a unique vantage point, clarity of terms is

important. Toward that end, definitions of *spirituality*, *spiritual belief*, and *collective spirituality* are offered, and spirituality is contrasted with religion.

## *Spirituality*

The literature to date on spirituality has offered a wide variety of definitions for the term *spirituality* (Giacalone and Jurkiewicz 2003). Generally, spirituality refers to the concern with or connection to a transcendent being and often includes an individual's search for an ultimate purpose in life (Fry 2003). Mitroff and Denton (1999, p. xv) defined spirituality as "the basic desire to find ultimate meaning and purpose in one's life and to live an integrated life." Ashforth and Pratt (2003) proposed three dimensions to spirituality in a workplace context: connection with something greater than the self (transcendence), an integration of the various aspects of the self (holism), and realization of one's potential (growth). Consistent with Ashforth and Pratt's definition, for the purposes of this work the term *spirituality* will refer to the human desire for connection with the transcendent, the desire for integration of the self into a meaningful whole, and the realization of one's potential.

## *Spiritual Beliefs and Collective Spirituality*

In this article, the term *spiritual belief* will be used to describe the individual experience of spirituality. This is different from collective spirituality, or the experience of spirituality at the organizational level.

## *Spirituality and Religion*

The terms *spirituality* and *religion* have different but overlapping meanings in both academic and popular use (Zinnbauer et al. 1997). The literature on spirituality and leadership has often attempted to differentiate between spirituality and religion (Giacalone and Jurkiewicz 2003; Mitroff and Denton 1999). The basic argument has been that spirituality speaks to a common human condition, while religion refers to the polity, practices, and creeds of a particular denomination or faith body. Thus, the argument asserts, spirituality can be a unifying force in the field of leadership, while religion can be fractious (Cavanaugh 1999; Gotsis and Kortezi 2007; Nadesan 1999). For a more complete discussion of the differences and similarities between spirituality and religion, see Hill et al. (2000).

In many ways, the terms *spiritual belief* and *religious belief* are not dichotomous. As Kurth (2003) points out, a notion like "service" exists as a central theme in as many as 11 major religions and can also be found completely separate from religion. So, while service may be embraced

by one individual as a religious belief, for academic study it would not be accurate to define service as an exclusively religious belief.

Given the purpose of this article, the term “spiritual belief” will be used to describe a broader category that includes some religious beliefs. The question addressed herein is how the beliefs of a strategic leader influence his or her decision making. Whether the leader in question would characterize those beliefs as spiritual or religious is not particularly important for the present purposes. For that reason, in this article the term “spiritual belief” will be used to describe all beliefs concerning the transcendent. Subsumed within that category are both spiritual beliefs and any religious beliefs relating to the transcendent.

## Literature Review

To construct a framework describing the influence of spiritual belief on strategic leaders we must first begin with a review of the relevant literature. Because of the integrative nature of this paper, the literature review will include a review of relevant literature in both strategic leadership and spirituality and leadership.

### Strategic Leadership

The study of strategic leadership is focused on leaders who have overall responsibility for an organization, such as executives, top management teams, and boards of directors (Phillips and Hunt 1992). Strategic leadership is contrasted with supervisory theories of leadership. Supervisory leaders focus on guiding, directing, and supporting subordinates, while strategic leaders focus on creating organizational meaning and purpose (Boal and Hooijberg 2001; House and Aditya 1997). An aspect of strategic leadership particularly relevant to the discussion of spirituality is that organizations are thought to be reflections of their top leaders (Cannella and Monroe 1997; Hambrick and Mason 1984). More specifically, Cannella and Monroe (1997, p. 213) assert, “the specific knowledge, experience, values, and preferences of top managers are reflected not only in their decisions, but in their assessments of decision situations.”

One of the early influential theories in this field was known as upper echelons theory (Hambrick and Mason 1984). The central tenant of upper echelons theory was that organizational outcomes were a reflection of the top leader’s cognition and values. Upper echelons theory was ultimately expanded into strategic leadership theory (Finkelstein and Hambrick 1996). In addition to cognition and values, contemporary strategic leadership considers the leaders’ psychological makeup and contextual factors. Boal and Hooijberg (2001) proposed that the essence of strategic

leadership is the creation and maintenance of an organization’s absorptive capacity (the ability to learn) and adaptive capacity (the ability to change). For a more complete history of the study of strategic leadership, see Leavy (1996).

Inherent in strategic leadership theory is the acknowledgment that the way decisions are made is influenced by what the leader brings to the task. As Cannella and Monroe (1997) describe it, “strategic leadership theory contends that top managers’ values, cognitions, and personalities affect their field of vision, their selective perception of information, and their interpretation of information.” In this way, strategic leadership places a strong emphasis on the decision making of top leaders. Though the focus of study is often on the top leader, strategic leadership theory also recognizes that organizational outcomes can be influenced by a dominant coalition (Cannella and Monroe 1997).

Ultimately, strategic leadership is important because of the influence it has on the organization. Strategic leaders do not exercise influence in the same way as managers operating at lower levels of the organization (Jacobs and Lewis 1992). Because of the scope of their influence, their decisions can have profound consequences for the organization. In their review of how strategic leadership fared in the first decade of the twenty-first century, Hitt et al. (2010) concluded that many strategic leaders failed to deal effectively with environmental turbulence. They attributed these failures in strategic leadership to short-term focus, hubris, greed, and unethical decision making. These failures highlight the importance of examining how the spiritual beliefs of strategic leaders can influence their organizational decision making.

### Spirituality and Leadership

The academic literature on spirituality and leadership has taken various approaches to the topic. These approaches have included the definition and measurement of spirituality (Ashar and Lane-Maher 2004; Ashmos and Duchon 2000; Lynn et al. 2008; Reave 2005; Seidlitz et al. 2002), spirituality and organizational change (Dehler and Welsh 1994; Milliman et al. 1999; Mitroff and Denton 1999; Wagner-Marsh and Conley 1999), spiritual leadership as a distinct leadership style (Fry, 2003; Fry et al. 2005), the influence of spiritual belief on the leader’s role (McCormick 1994; Nash and McLennan 2001; Parameshwar 2005; Worden 2005), and cautions against the misuse of spirituality (Elmes and Smith 2001; Goodier and Eisenberg 2006; Nadesan 1999; Tourish and Pennington 2002).

As Gotsis and Kortezi (2007) observed, the broad array of literature on spirituality and leadership lacks a prevailing framework or dominant paradigm. Because of the purpose of this article, specific focus will be placed on those prior

works that have addressed the personal spiritual beliefs of leaders.

### *The Influence of Spiritual Belief on the Leader's Role*

There are only a few prior academic articles that have focused on the personal spiritual beliefs of the leader as they relate to strategic leadership. Observing that most of the works on spirituality and management have failed to address the individual manager's relationship with the sacred, McCormick (1994) offered five themes observed in the literature and practice of spirituality and management: compassion, right livelihood, selfless service, work as meditation, and problems with pluralism.

Nash and McLennan (2001) examined the ways leaders integrate personal religious faith with business life and described three levels of engagement: espoused, catalytic, and foundational. Espoused religion is a publicly proclaimed affiliation wherein the proclaimer and the religious faith are bound in a common understanding (e.g., institutionalized creeds). The authors note that this approach can be highly problematic, leading to claims of proselytizing or abdicating leadership responsibility to an ecclesiastical authority. Catalytic engagement with religion refers to a personal experience that transforms one's outlook. Under this model of engagement, it is possible for leaders to interact with other world views in a way that is both personally authentic yet not subject to criticism as proselytizing. At the foundational level of engagement, personal experience is placed in a context larger than the self and understood as part of a larger principle of truth.

While instructive, Nash and McLennan's (2001) work does not fully address the question raised here. Their work considers the broader impact of religious belief on business life in general, while the current work focuses on the narrower issue of organizational decision making. In this way, the current work could be viewed as an extension of the initial inquiry done by Nash and McLennan.

The prior work most relevant to the current question was done by Fernando and Jackson (2006). They interviewed leaders from multiple religious traditions about how they engaged in religion-based workplace spirituality. They found that leaders' reasons for engaging in workplace spirituality were often associated with decision making, particularly in "difficult moments." In other words, when asked how their spiritual beliefs were expressed at work, these leaders specifically described turning to their spiritual beliefs when faced with difficult organizational decisions. Fernando and Jackson (2006, p. 35) conclude, "when spiritually motivated leaders are challenged to the extent that they need to reach deeper and draw from their spirituality to find the 'right way' of managing the situation, it is likely that their decision-making process plays a major,

if not the dominant, role in determining the outcome." This conclusion illustrates the importance of understanding how the personal spiritual beliefs of strategic leaders operate, and emphasizes the importance of the question addressed herein.

### *Personal Belief in Leadership Theory*

Recent work in leadership theory has begun to address the issue of how leaders' personal beliefs are expressed in their leadership role. Authentic leadership theorists, for e.g., Avolio and Gardner (2005) and Gardner et al. (2005) have asserted that the values and beliefs of authentic leaders will influence their leadership at the dyadic, group, and organizational levels. This influence, it is argued, will lead to higher performance. Other authors have sought to distinguish between the "moral person" and the "moral manager" (Brown and Treviño 2006; Brown et al. 2005; Treviño et al. 2000). The moral person refers to the leader's personal traits, character, and altruistic orientation. The moral manager refers to the leader's efforts to influence follower's ethical and unethical behaviors (Brown and Treviño 2006). This differentiation between the person of the leader, together with their belief systems, from the role of the leader shows how the leadership field is moving toward a multi-level analysis of leadership. This work, exploring how personal belief systems interact with strategic decision making, continues in that direction.

### *Spiritual/Religious Belief and Ethics*

Another context in which individual belief systems have been examined in organizational decision making is in business ethics. Since the mid 1980s, a number of researchers have explored the relationship between religiosity and ethical decision making (Vitell 2010). In general, these studies have found religiosity to be linked with higher ethical judgment. Early studies looked for correlation between strength of religious belief and attitude toward ethically questionable scenarios (McNichols and Zimmerman 1985; Shepherd and Hartenian 1990). More recent work on the relationship has looked at factors such as the extent of the individual's religious intensity, (Longenecker et al. 2004), and links between religiosity and recognizing an ethical problem (Kurpis et al. 2008). This thread of research illustrates the value of examining how individual belief systems can influence leaders' approach organizational decision making.

### *Cautionary Literature*

There is a growing collection of authors cautioning against potential misuse or manipulation under the guise of



corporate spirituality (Elmes and Smith 2001; Goodier and Eisenberg 2006; Nadesan 1999; Tourish and Pennington 2002). Elmes and Smith (2001) caution against the abuse of personal spirituality as a tool for increasing productivity by garnering a deeper commitment from employees. A similar position is taken by Nadesan (1999) who asserts that workplace spirituality promotes entrepreneurial views of the self and attempts to adapt the individual to new workplace arrangements. Nadesan argues that corporate spiritualism threatens to define personal spiritual identity by shaping the discourse about spirituality. Put another way, the notion of bringing one's "whole self" to work could be seen as a way of increasing employees' sense of wholeness, or alternatively, as a way of increasing the resources available for organizational use.

The concerns raised by these authors serve as a backdrop for the questions raised herein. Though the underlying question concerns the personal spiritual beliefs of the leaders, these cautionary articles emphasize that the exercise of those personal beliefs by leaders may have positive or negative implications for followers, as well as for the organization as a whole.

## A Proposed Framework

The purpose of this article is to offer a framework for understanding the influence of a strategic leader's personal spiritual belief on strategic decision making. Before that framework can be constructed, however, we must first consider the issue of spiritual beliefs and schemas.

### Spiritual Beliefs and Schemas

The cognitive framework used by a leader has long been acknowledged as an important influence on the decision-making process (Daft and Weick 1984; Kiesler and Sproull 1982) and is sometimes referred to as a cognitive map, paradigm, frame, or schema (Bartunek and Moch 1987). Schemas assist with the potentially overwhelming amount of information available to a leader by reducing the amount of information received. They do this by guiding the person to attend to some information while ignoring other information. Additionally, schemas assist the individual in integrating the information into a coherent whole (Bartunek and Moch 1987). Thus, schemas influence which information the leader notices and how that information is interpreted (Lant and Hewlin 2002).

A more refined type of schema, known as strategic schema, has been described for top level leaders responsible for setting organizational direction. Strategic schemas also have been called dominant logic, strategy frame, or belief structure (Nadkarni and Narayanan 2007). A

strategic schema operates as a lens through which the strategic leader filters information about the organizational context when making decisions (Nadkarni and Narayanan 2007). As Thomas et al. (1993, p. 240) describe it, "the imposition of meaning on issues characterized by ambiguity has become a hallmark of the modern top manager." Boal and Schultz (2007, p. 423) argue that through stories such as life narratives, strategic leaders "not only interpret and make sense of their environment, more importantly they act as sense givers to other members of the organization...." The literature on strategic schemas describes three mechanisms whereby schemas influence decision making: scanning, interpretation, and action (Daft and Weick 1984; Milliken 1990; Thomas et al. 1993).

The concept of a schema is important to the present topic because it provides a model for understanding how an individual leader's spiritual beliefs influence the exercise of strategic decision making. If we accept that spiritual beliefs constitute a belief structure, we can conclude that they will operate as a schema. Thus, we can argue that the individual spiritual beliefs of a strategic leader serve to filter the data to which the leader attends, and to frame or assign meaning to the data that is accepted.

**Proposition 1** *The personal spiritual beliefs of a leader act as a schema during strategic decision making by filtering out information and framing information for the leader.*

Others have proposed the idea of a "spiritual schema," though with somewhat different meaning (Poll and Smith 2003). And the idea that beliefs influence strategic decision making is also not new. Strategic leadership theory asserts that a manager's values, cognitions, and personality affect his or her field of vision, selective perception, and interpretation of information (Cannella and Monroe 1997). In this way, the idea of spiritual beliefs operating as a schema is consistent with strategic leadership theory. Other authors have proposed that religious beliefs (McIntosh 1995; Worden 2005) or ethical beliefs (Ireland and Hitt 1999) might act as a filter through which the strategic leader sorts potential courses of action. However, these works propose only that beliefs serve to filter the options considered by a strategic leader. The current work expands on the notion of spiritual belief as schema to propose that spiritual beliefs act to both limit options (filtering of available information) as well as interpret information (framing). This extension gives a fuller picture of the operation of spiritual beliefs in strategic decision making, while grounding the idea in an existing theory of human cognition.

Seeing spiritual beliefs as schemas raises an important potential research question: do spiritual beliefs operate differently in decision making than other schemas? Prior research in this area raises the possibility that spiritual

beliefs could operate in ways different from schemas, particularly when there are complex personal or interpersonal reasons behind a leader's particular belief (e.g., adherence to institutional creeds). Weaver and Agle (2002) suggested that the relationship between leaders' religious belief and their ethical behavior is complicated by factors such as religious self-identity, the salience of that self-identity, and the motivation for being religious. Their analysis suggests that the operation of a schema that is spiritual may depend on other factors. While much of that question lies beyond the scope of this work, the field would benefit from further research on that question.

### Mediating Variables

If spiritual beliefs act as schemas for the strategic leader, we must next consider what other variables may affect the operation of spiritual beliefs as schemas. Two related variables are offered as mediating variables: constructive development and meta-belief. Both concern how the leader's method of processing information affects the use of spiritual belief.

#### *Constructive Development*

Constructive development is premised on the idea that the experience of reality is constructed at an individual level, and that the method whereby individuals construct their reality evolves over their lifetimes. Kegan (1982, 1994) proposed a series of stages, each characterized by a particular pattern of meaning making. As an individual's stage of constructive development advances, his or her ability to think with complexity expands. For a more complete description of constructive developmental theory, see Kegan (1982).

Constructive developmental theory is important to the current question, in part, because it parallels one of the fundamental premises underlying strategic leadership theory: top level leaders need the ability to think differently. Jacques and Clement (1991) (as cited in Phillips and Hunt 1992) argue in their presentation of stratified systems theory (SST) that the cognitive complexity required for effective leadership increases as the leader's level of responsibility advances in the organization. Stated another way, top level leaders require the ability to think with greater complexity in order to effectively meet the demands of a more complex leadership role (Lewis and Jacobs 1992). In a similar fashion, Lewis and Jacobs (1992, p. 122) emphasize the importance of constructive development to strategic leadership: "It is not nearly as important to discover what a potential strategic leader believes (a values issue) or how he or she prefers to operate (a style issue) as it is to know how the leader structures an understanding of the strategic environment." This perspective suggests two relevant

insights. First, constructive development plays a role in how the leader's beliefs influence strategic decision making. Second, the influence exercised by constructive development may actually control or determine the influence exercised by leader beliefs. Thus, the leader's constructive development acts as a mediating variable, transmitting the effect of belief on strategic decision making.

**Proposition 2** *The leader's stage of constructive development will mediate the effect of the leader's beliefs on strategic decision making.*

#### *Meta-Belief*

Another variable likely to affect how a leader's beliefs influence strategic decision making is what the leader believes about his or her own belief structure. For the purposes of this paper, we will refer to this self awareness of belief as *meta-belief*. The idea is that each spiritual belief is placed in a particular context and used in a particular way by an individual. The context assigned and the use given are the products of a value or belief ascribed by that individual to the spiritual belief in question. For example, the influence of a spiritual belief on strategic decision making will be different for a leader who believes in the ultimate validity of his or her spiritual belief, as compared to a leader who imagines his or her belief to be a limited perception of an ultimate reality. In this way, the concept of meta-belief is really not about the belief itself, but about how that belief is held.

There are strong parallels between the idea of meta-belief and constructive development. In fact, an important characteristic of the later stages of meaning making in constructive developmental theory is the ability to acknowledge and coordinate the thoughts and needs of others (Kegan 1982, 1994). This raises the possibility that meta-belief is merely an expression of constructive development. Put another way, the leader's method of holding a belief may be entirely caused by that leader's stage of constructive development. However, individuals who make meaning at a higher order are still capable of constructing meaning at a lower order in a particular circumstance (Lewis and Jacobs 1992). Therefore, it is possible that a leader, for whatever reason, could insulate his or her spiritual beliefs from change or examination, resulting in a meta-belief that is not synonymous with that leader's higher capacity for meaning making.

In the related field of cognitive complexity, at least one empirical study has examined the complexity of thought in those with orthodox or fundamental religious belief (Prancer et al. 1995). In this study, complexity of thought was defined as the ability to recognize that more than one point of view might be valid on an issue. The study found

that individuals who are high in orthodox or fundamental religious beliefs think less complexly about religious issues. However, the results showed no reduction in complex thought for those same individuals when considering nonreligious issues. In other words, the ability to recognize other perspectives is limited only in the domain of religion.

These examples illustrate that, while they may be connected, an individual's meta-belief is not necessarily synonymous with his or her stage of constructive development. For this reason, meta-belief is proposed herein as a separate mediating variable.

**Proposition 3** *What a leader believes about his or her spiritual beliefs (meta-belief) will mediate the effect of the leader's beliefs on strategic decision making.*

#### Moderating Variables

In addition to the mediating variables discussed above, there are important contextual variables that will affect how a strategic leader's personal beliefs influence decision making. Two important moderating variables, organizational context and leadership style, are discussed below.

#### *Organizational Context*

Organizational context has been shown to have an impact on the meaning top leaders attach to information in strategic decision making (Thomas and McDaniel 1990). Organizational context is a broad category that can include several different attributes. Organizational structure, communication channels, and decision rules direct the attention of decision makers toward particular information (Ocasio 1997). Organizational structure and decision rules may affect the discretion available to the leader, and communication channels may affect the strategic leader's access to information. Furthermore, organizational culture filters the perspective of its members, shaping the questions they ask about the organizational environment (Smith and Vecchio 1997). Industry dynamics such as the rate of industry change also could moderate the extent to which a leader's belief influences strategic decision making (Nadkarni and Narayanan 2007).

In light of the breadth of what constitutes organizational context, Johns (2006) differentiated between two types of context: omnibus context (e.g. national and organizational culture, industry and occupation, organizational structure, and time) and discrete context (e.g. nature of the task, social dynamics, and physical setting). Both of these types of context could moderate the influence of a strategic leader's spiritual belief on decision making. Elements of the omnibus context such as national culture would certainly play a role in how spiritual belief is expressed in

decision making. For example, Escobar (2011) described how differences between Puerto Rican and American perspectives on reality shape how spiritual beliefs influence ethics. And, Worden (2003) explored how both religious belief and nationalism played a role in the strategic leadership of J. N. Tata, founder of Tata Industries. Both of these examples show how the larger omnibus context can moderate the influence of the strategic leader's spiritual belief on decision making.

Similarly, elements of the discrete context could moderate the influence of a strategic leader's spiritual beliefs. Aaron Feuerstein, CEO of Malden Mills, cited his Jewish religious convictions among the reasons why he continued to pay his production workers after his manufacturing facility burned down (Weaver and Agle 2002). Despite making this decision, in part, from his personal spiritual beliefs, it was the discrete context of Malden Mills that gave Feuerstein the authority, accountability, and resources to make this decision. We can imagine many corporate contexts in which the CEO would not be able to make the same decision due to constraints on the organization, despite feeling compelled by their spiritual beliefs. In this way, the discrete context can be said to moderate the influence of the strategic leader's spiritual belief on decision making.

**Proposition 4** *Components of the omnibus (national and organizational culture, industry and occupation, organizational structure, time) and discrete (situational) context combine to moderate the effect of the leader's spiritual beliefs on the information considered and used by the leader in strategic decision making.*

#### *Leadership Style*

The particular style of leadership adopted and practiced by a strategic leader will moderate the extent to which an individual's spiritual belief influences strategic decision making. A lengthy examination of the ways in which each particular leadership style might moderate that influence is beyond the scope of this work. However, in a sense it is not the style that is moderating the influence, but rather the collection of behaviors that are typified in that leadership style. In an early work on strategic leadership, Hosmer (1982) described how both behavioral and contingency theories of leadership looked to similar definitions of the leader's influence on organizational activities. Those sources of influence were personal traits, interpersonal patterns, positional influences, and social methods. Using this framework, we can see how the influence of a leader's belief on strategic decision making might depend upon whether he or she was a participatory or autocratic leader, reliant on positional power or referent power, or other



distinguishing characteristics. In this way, the leader’s approach to the role of strategic leader (i.e., leadership style) impacts the extent to which personal spiritual belief influences decision making.

**Proposition 5** *The leadership style in use by the leader will moderate the effect of the leader’s spiritual beliefs on the information considered and used by the leader in strategic decision making.*

The Framework

Taken together, the propositions above begin to illustrate a process whereby leader beliefs influence strategic decision making. Within the organizational context, the spiritual beliefs of the leader, shaped by the leader’s constructive development and meta-belief, serve to filter and assign meaning to the available data. This process is illustrated in Fig. 1 and can be proposed as follows:

**Proposition 6** *The information considered by the strategic leader and the way that information is used in strategic decision making will be influenced by the leader’s personal spiritual beliefs. That influence will be mediated by the meta-belief and constructive development of the leader and moderated by the organizational context and leadership style in use.*

It should be noted that Fig. 1 is not meant to illustrate the entire process whereby strategic leaders filter and frame information. Leaders have schemas that reflect many experiences and cognitive processes. Similarly, there may be many influences on strategic leaders as they engage in decision making in addition to personal spiritual beliefs. Figure 1 is not meant to illustrate the entire process of strategic decision making, but rather to illustrate the way strategic leaders’ spiritual beliefs influence their decision making.

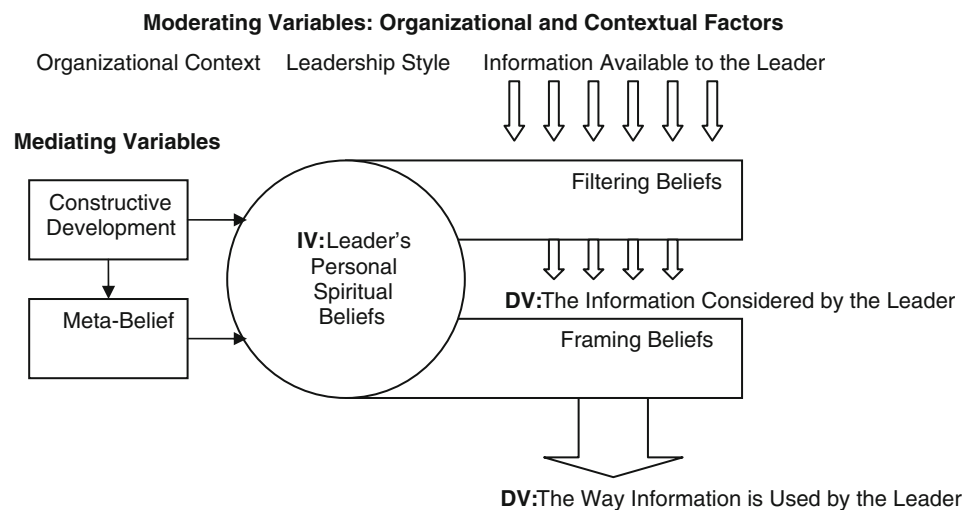
Discussion

With this framework in mind, we return to a discussion of the academic literature on spirituality and leadership. Much of the interest in this topic presumably stems from a belief that leaders who incorporate spirituality in their leadership produce better organizational outcomes. Yet this observation presents a dilemma for researchers. If they attempt to identify which spiritual beliefs or practices might lead to improved outcomes, the concerns of coercion and diminished diversity raised by Hicks (2002) and others become heightened. If they avoid quantifying which beliefs are beneficial, the field will continue to be limited in its ability to empirically prove the benefits of spirituality in leadership. This tension may be part of the reason the literature on spirituality and leadership remains largely conceptual.

The framework presented herein has the potential to soften the dilemma of quantifying beneficial spiritual beliefs. First, by specifying the level of analysis for the leader’s spirituality as individual, the implied coercion found in the idea of “corporate spirituality” is alleviated. Second, in the proposed framework the method by which spirituality offers strategic advantage is not interpersonal. Strategic advantage is gained in how the leader makes meaning of the context, not in how the followers receive that meaning. While follower response will ultimately be relevant to the leader’s success, getting followers to adopt the same beliefs as the leader is not required.

The framework proposed above also makes it possible to researchers and practitioners to consider the organizational efficacy of a spiritual belief in context. Rather than influencing the followers, a leader’s spiritual belief ultimately influences the strategic leader. A spiritual belief, as mediated by the leader’s constructive development and meta-belief, causes the leader to access more or less relevant information,

**Fig. 1** The influence of a strategic leader’s spiritual belief on decision making



and frame the organizational setting in a more or less positive and productive way. This framework provides a mechanism for discussing the organizational efficacy of a leader's spiritual belief, without passing judgment on the value of the belief itself. Thus, we can make the following propositions regarding the spiritual beliefs that, in context, will provide strategic advantage to the top level leader.

**Proposition 7** *Those spiritual beliefs that operate with moderating and mediating variables to allow the most relevant information to be considered in the strategic decision making process will provide strategic advantage to top level leaders.*

**Proposition 8** *Those spiritual beliefs that operate with moderating and mediating variables to promote the most positive or productive framing of the organizational context will provide strategic advantage to top level leaders.*

It is important to note that this framework does not argue for the efficacy of any particular spiritual belief. Rather, it is argued that, depending on the context and mediating variables, a strategic leader's spiritual beliefs *can* provide strategic advantage in the way they filter and frame the information available to the leader. Thus the strategic advantage is not the product of having the "right" belief, but rather is the product of how the belief is used by the leader. Such an approach avoids the risk of coercion identified above, and provides a framework for an organization where leaders and followers can effectively negotiate religious and spiritual diversity (Hicks 2002).

It should also be noted that nothing in this paper is meant to equate spirituality with a positive outlook on life. In fact, as Benefiel (2005) points out, neither individual nor organizational experiences with spirituality are unflinchingly positive. The process of acknowledging something larger than the self is sometimes turbulent and painful, resulting in disillusionment and the "dark night of the soul." This phase of loss is necessary to spiritual growth, argues Benefiel, and should not be overlooked in the organizational examination of spirituality. Applying this insight to the issue at hand, a belief that serves to frame the organizational context should not be judged solely by whether it frames a desirable or optimistic picture. As Benefiel notes, it is possible that reorientation of an organization beyond itself leads to that organization's demise. Thus, a belief should be considered efficacious when, much like resiliency (Luthans et al. 2007), it frames a context open to new possibilities despite the current challenges.

#### Contributions to the Literature

This framework makes several important contributions to the literature on spirituality and leadership. First, it demonstrates the importance of deliberateness in the level of

analysis by extending the examination of spirituality and leadership to top level leaders as an individual construct. Specificity of this type will hopefully lead to separate threads of research for each level of analysis, paving the way for a multi-level theory of spirituality and leadership.

Second, the framework offered herein provides researchers a more objective stance from which to study the influence of spiritual belief on decision making. Placing the focus on how the belief is used rather than on the belief itself reduces the appearance that researchers are passing judgment on the veracity, consistency, or desirability of individual spiritual beliefs. While complete objectivity in an area such as this is not likely achievable, the framework provides a basis for considering whether a specific belief helps or hinders a leader's strategic decision making, after considering the context and method in which the belief is used. This shift from examining the belief itself to examining its effect in the organizational context makes it possible for researchers and practitioners to examine the efficacy of a particular belief, together with the leader's meta-belief, in a way that would have previously been far more controversial. This is possible because the framework examines the beneficial or detrimental *effect* of a belief, not the belief itself. A diversity of spiritual belief among leaders is assumed. The role of the academic community is not to determine the veracity, consistency, or social desirability of those beliefs, but to examine the impact they have upon the leader's role in practice.

The consideration of spirituality and leadership has raised difficult questions concerning leadership development. If spirituality is legitimately a source of strategic advantage, how does one develop it? Can (or should) a leader make a rational decision to be "spiritual" because of its strategic advantage? These questions have remained unanswered in the literature to date. The framework proposed in this work offers a starting point that alleviates some of the concern raised by these questions. This framework assumes strategic leaders already have spiritual beliefs that influence their exercise of leadership. The strategic advantage those beliefs provide in organizational decision making will increase as the leader examines how he or she uses them to filter or frame available information. Through higher levels of constructive development, reflection, and self awareness about how those beliefs are used, a leader could increase the likelihood that personal spiritual beliefs would provide strategic advantage in future decision making. Leadership development then becomes less about adding spirituality and more about examining the existing belief system and its method of use by the leader.

#### Future Research

This approach to spirituality and leadership highlights opportunities for research and integration not explored the

spiritual leadership literature to date. In particular, the framework could serve as a theoretical foundation for the creation of a multilevel theory of spirituality and leadership. Avolio (2007, p. 31) has argued that the development of future leadership theories needs “a more integrative focus that is multilevel, multicomponent, and interdisciplinary and that recognizes that leadership is a function of both the leader and the led and the complexity of the context.” While this framework expands the consideration of spirituality to both individual belief systems and top level leaders, the integration of followers into such a model remains to be done (see Frye et al. 2007). With such an integration, this framework could provide a more complete picture of the many ways in which spiritual and religious beliefs are at work in organizations.

## Summary

This work has extended the consideration of spirituality and leadership to the level of strategic leadership by proposing a framework for understanding how a strategic leader’s personal beliefs affect decision making. It is proposed that a strategic leader’s spiritual beliefs act like schemas to filter or frame the information the leader considers, and that the influence of those beliefs is mediated by the leader’s constructive development and meta-belief and moderated by organizational context and leadership style. It is hoped that this framework can provide a foundation for future efforts to develop a multi-level theory of spirituality and leadership.

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