

BOOK REVIEW

Religion and Business; or, Spiritual Life in One of its Secular Departments

By Alfred J. Morris

(Originally published in 1853; reprinted by Leopold Classic Library, 2016 and a few years earlier by Kesinger Publishing)

Reviewed by

David G. Duby

Liberty University

As a teacher of business ethics at a Christian university, the title of A.J. Morris' book caught my attention: *Religion and Business; or, Spiritual Life in One of its Secular Departments*. For me, the title suggested secular/sacred compartmentalization at its finest, reinforcing the erroneous notion that business is a secular pursuit that exists, in part, to fund the spiritual work of the Church. Originally published in the 19th century but recently reprinted, the book is based on a series of sermons Morris preached—not because he wanted to, but because, as Morris states, “scarcely anyone else” had addressed the topic. I’m glad he did. For a business ethicist who uses texts like Van Duzer’s *Why Business Matters to God* and Stevens’ *Doing God’s Business*, it is always interesting to hear a voice from the past wrestle with issues we continue to address today.

In the forward, the author notes that though commerce’s “evils are almost universally admitted” (sound familiar?), the pulpit has given it little attention. Thus Morris begins his sermon series with an introductory chapter on “Religion and Business.” For Morris, there is a need to connect one’s faith and practice within every sphere of life. The Gospel, he notes, “is not an abstraction. There is no part of it which is intended to remain merely an object of thought” (p. 4). Therefore teaching on this topic is needed, even for those committed to Christianity, since it is folly to assume that a right belief in God will translate into right actions. Morris’ first chapter highlights that a Christian businessman’s good works and upright approach can demonstrate the power of the Gospel in business itself. This establishes the framework for the six lectures that follow.

In the second chapter, Morris establishes the value of work and the need for the Christian to embrace it.

Reflecting our current understanding of vocation, Morris reminds his readers that work is a good and noble thing in and of itself. And this nobleness is not relegated to a certain type of work. Morris believes that all who labor are worthy of esteem, from those who design to those who build. Even the “thinker” (the creative worker) is called to a noble task, since all such talents and abilities are given by God. While not articulating buzzwords such as purpose and self-actualization, Morris posits that work that results in a man being poured into a thing provides him with something good. And in a foreshadowing of Kuyper, Morris believes a Christian thriving in business is fulfilling the sphere God intended for him.

Another interesting note Morris makes is that “bad” things cannot be made; instead, “neutral” things can be made bad. However, that is in the purview of the user (Morris includes weapons and beer as examples). Another key point of this lecture is that, although work is good, it is subservient to godliness. To that end, he warns against people working too much. While his admonition against overwork in the pursuit of wealth has merit, he does so by noting the need to break free from “the painful and monotonous slavery of his lower powers” (p. 44). This might reflect a more problematic thought: gifts applied to commerce are lower than the gifts that directly serve the Church.

Next, Morris explores *how* a businessman engages in commerce. What attitudes and behaviors are expected of him? Here the preacher in Morris shines as he seeks to guide those in business toward righteousness in their enterprise. Morris makes his point clear: Christianity demands moral integrity of all those who participate in commerce, and this integrity is rooted in Truth. Truth,

for Morris, is the precursor to biblical justice. “Honesty is justice,” Morris insists, since it gives everyone his “due” (p. 58). And speaking of ensuring all are provided their “due,” Morris tackles an issue that continues to be debated amongst Christians in business today: can a Christian, in good conscience, declare bankruptcy? For Morris, bankruptcy may be legal, but it is not moral—it robs the lender of what he is due.

Morris devotes a section that seems to address at least the spirit of the current debate regarding Corporate Social Responsibility. Morris reflects on what he has heard businessmen proclaim: “Business is business, and charity is charity.” But Morris makes his perspective on this just as clear, noting a “more erroneous maxim, a maxim more destitute of the spirit of Christianity, I have never listened to.” (p. 61). While Morris may not be referring to donating profits to the United Way, he does remind the reader that Christianity requires the exercise of love and kindness in commerce. For Morris, this can display the Gospel, since “ungodly men cannot see us believe, cannot hear us pray, but they behold our behaviour towards our brethren” (p. 69).

The final chapters examine more specific areas for the Christian in business, such as a Christian’s attitude toward prosperity. Here Morris make an interesting observation: no matter how successful the businessman, he more often than not modestly defers to those who are more successful as examples of success. Morris concludes that this is likely due to the responsibilities that would come from acknowledging great prosperity. Morris also addresses failure in business and reminds the reader that “Christianity does not secure its disciples against misfortune and calamity” (p. 97). In this section the author seeks to explore *how* the Christian responds to failures in business, rather than why the Christian experiences failures in the first place. And in this, he makes an observation that God is not just in the midst of failure, He brings the Christian along to see beyond the failure, to redeem it for something better—a powerful antidote to the profound disappointment one might feel while enduring failure.

Morris also challenges our modern sensibilities regarding retirement. The author relates the way those in the 1850s viewed the notion of retirement—that it was absurd. Morris readily admits that the concept of willingly retiring from a successful career may sound “very strange and perhaps very ridiculous to some” (p. 119).

But he denotes several instances when one may, with good conscience, retire and leave commerce behind. He then encourages the former businessman to explore areas that time did not allow while pursuing business. And this leads to Morris’ final chapter, in which he reminds the reader that, willingly or not, business will end for all. And while he starkly reminds us that such an end may come by death, he also relates that there can be tenderness in the “adieu” to business. Morris closes his book with a Gospel message and our need for Christ’s redemptive work. He extols the virtues of the Redeemer as the only Virtue worthy of Heaven, and thus encouraging the reader to rest in Christ’s righteousness. And Morris’ final thought presents a unique twist on the concept that you “can’t take it with you.” In some ways, Morris explains, you *can*. Though the stuff of earth will remain, the Christian retains “all that made that life holy and noble” (p. 149) and encourages the businessman and woman with the thought that if he found joy in work below, so he will in work above.

In the early pages of his work, Morris stated, “It has been a mighty mischief that religion has been so often divorced from the other modes and ways of human life” and men have seen it as “having its own sphere and its own powers” (pp. 10-11). Thus Morris is an early voice for the integrated life of the Christian in business. However, he repeatedly refers to business as the “secular life” and the overt pursuits of God, such as Sabbath rest, prayer, and worship, as the sacred life. It may appear that Morris unwittingly continues the very bifurcation he seeks to end. But this reads more as the way various areas of life were expressed at that time rather than a doctrine of separation.

At times, the book reads as a sermon from the 1850s might, and the slightly blotted, tightly-kerned typeface lends a historic air to the words. But it doesn’t read as a “high church” sermon. Indeed, Morris’ introduction informs the reader that the book “is not controversial, nor doctrinal, but practical.” While at least a measure of controversy can be found in any exegesis of a biblical passage, and while doctrine is certainly found within its pages, a true strength of the book is its practicality. Morris relates his observations in numerous examples, links his arguments with reasonable “therefores,” and weaves Scriptural support with common sense to reach his conclusions. You likely won’t always agree with Morris, but you’ll understand where

he's coming from. And you'll be thankful for an early voice calling for the Christian in business to see his or her work as something noble, as something that allows the light of the Gospel to flourish, and as a calling in which we can honor God and serve one another in our Kingdom work.



David DUBY, PhD, is a Professor of Business in the School of Business at Liberty University in Lynchburg, Virginia. He teaches project management and business ethics to undergraduate students as well as project management courses in the MBA and DBA programs.