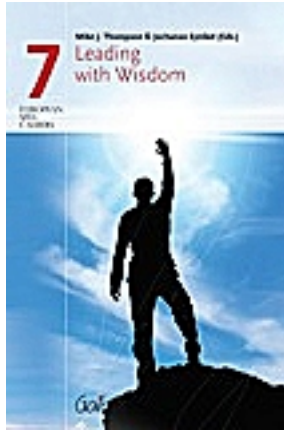


## EUROPEAN SPES CAHIER 7: LEADING WITH WISDOM

### Product Details



Editors: Mike J. Thompson and Jochanan Eynikel  
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[Contents](#)

#### Publisher's description:

The European SPES Forum continues its mission to bring informed debate on issues related to spirituality and society in this seventh cahier with a focus on the nature of wisdom and its practice by leaders. Eight authors bring a breadth of style and thinking to the way in which leaders lead and how wisdom (connected to spirituality) can result in a more integrated and peaceful practice of leadership. We are treated to both narrative, reflective and academic perspectives on Leading with Wisdom and the authors find wisdom to be closely connected to virtue, character, integrity, morality, spirituality, meaning and the knowledge of how to live well.

#### Review by Walter G. Moss

The eight essays in this collection are primarily devoted to encouraging wise leadership in the business world. They originated from the European SPES Forum annual conference in 2010. The SPES (SPirituality in Economics and Society) Forum began in 2000. Its originators were a few Belgium professors concerned with economic and business ethics and inspired by the thinking of the Frenchman Emmanuel Mounier (1905-50) and other personalist philosophers. In 2004 the SPES Forum leaders joined with Prof. Laszlo Zsolnai of the Business Ethics Center of the Corvinus University of Budapest to form the European SPES Forum. The latter's mission is "to make spirituality accessible as a public good to as many people as possible. It focuses on experience based spirituality that succeeds in making a connection between day-to-day activities and the inner quest for meaning."<sup>1</sup>

Although thinking about the relationship of ethics and economics is nothing new—as many of the writings of Mounier, Max Weber (1864-1920), Peter Drucker (1909-2005), Kenneth Boulding (1910-1993), and E. F. Schumacher (1911-1977) attest—the global Great Recession of recent years and the shoddy business practices that contributed to it have spurred a new emphasis on the necessity of more ethical business practices.<sup>2</sup>

The editors' Preface to the eight essays in *Leading with Wisdom* starts off with a quote from T. S. Eliot's poem "The Rock" (1934):

Where is the Life we have lost in living?

<sup>1</sup> See <http://www.eurospes.be/page.php?LAN=N&FILE=subject&ID=323&PAGE=1> for more on the SPES Forum.

<sup>2</sup> See also <http://www.wisdompage.com/wisissues02.html> for links to essays and other materials of the last few decades on "Spirituality in Business."

Where is the wisdom we have lost in knowledge?  
Where is the knowledge we have lost in information?

They also declare that “Wisdom is the hallmark of a responsible leader,” and quote the following from a *Harvard Business Review* blog: “The scarcest, rarest and most valuable resource in the world today is wisdom.” They identify wise leadership with spiritual leadership and maintain that the authors of the following eight essays “find wisdom to be closely connected to virtue, character, integrity, morality, spirituality, meaning and the knowledge how to live well.” The editors add that such leadership “is about integrating the *inner* perspectives of the leader with her or his decisions and actions in the *outer* world of business.” (7-9)

The authors of the eight essays are primarily professors and business and management consultants who share an interest in the relationship of business to spirituality and ethics. Although they are mainly from European universities, one (Mike Thompson) is from an international business school in Shanghai and another (Mark Strom) is a CEO of a consultancy based in Sydney. The sources the authors cite in their essays are often from journals such as *The Leadership Quarterly*, *Journal of Leadership Studies*, *Journal of Leadership and Organizational Studies*, and *Business Ethics: A European Review*. Thus, these essays are generally scholarly and often cite empirical case studies and research.

The first essay, by Peter Pruzan, is primarily devoted to spelling out and analyzing the results of interviews of “roughly 40 top leaders from 15 countries in six continents.” (12)<sup>3</sup> Pruzan is chiefly interested in spiritual-based leadership and has written several books dealing with the concept. Like SPES leaders and most other contributors to this collection, he defines spirituality differently than religion. The European SPES Forum Mission statement declares:

Spirituality is deliberately defined in broad and pluralistic terms so that the Forum may bring together people from different spiritual backgrounds and traditions. The Forum defines spirituality as people’s multiform search for meaning interconnecting them with all living beings and to God or Ultimate Reality.

Within this definition there is room for differing views, for spiritualities with and without God and for an ethics of dialogue. The Forum stands for a spiritual-based humanism which, among others, European ‘personalist’ philosophers have defended on philosophical grounds.

Pruzan agrees that spirituality may or may not include a focus on a Divine Being. Defining spirituality broadly as he does, he finds that the leaders he interviewed were overwhelmingly spiritual—it should be noted, however, that the 40 some leaders interviewed were selected on the basis of criteria that almost guaranteed their being spiritual, and that not all of the leaders were executives of for-profit companies.

Despite these caveats, it is refreshing to discover business people like the partner/director of a large Latin American enterprise who said: “Though being profitable is necessary for our development, success for the companies is not simply success in the traditional financial sense, but is tied to the principle of selfless service. As to our earnings, our aim is to use 25 percent of our profits for paying taxes, 25 percent for re-investment, 25 percent for us, and to give away 25 percent in donations.” (21) In general, however, few of the essays address the specifics of how individual companies put spiritual (or wisdom) principles into practice while still remaining profitable and competitive.

The second essay, by Mike Thompson, most thoroughly examines the nature of “Wisdom-based Leadership.” Although he cites Luk Bouckaert, one of the founders of SPES,

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<sup>3</sup> Most of these interviews are available at <http://www.globaldharma.org/sbl-research.htm>.

who has maintained that economic wisdom is the “proper subject of business ethics,”<sup>4</sup> Thompson is more concerned with the philosophy of leadership than with its practical application in the business world. He writes that “wisdom both embraces reason and goes beyond it” in that it also involves intuition and ethical behavior. It is “the practice of insight by an individual based on knowledge and perception which results in disinterested and just judgments that are respected by others.” (25, 27) In stressing the importance for wisdom of values such as empathy; humility, compassion, openness, and concern for the environment, his thinking is in line with the many wisdom scholars who have emphasized the significance of such values in making good decisions. As Macdonald succinctly has stated, “values are at the heart of the matter.”<sup>5</sup> Like the humanist psychologist Abraham Maslow and the economist and environmentalist E. F. Schumacher, Thompson also stresses the importance of ego transcendence—dying to oneself’ . . . to all one’s egocentric preoccupations,” as Schumacher states it—that is necessary for the highest wisdom.

In writing of the importance of balancing self-interest with that the interests of others and developing “wisdom-based responses to human and environmental challenges,” (38) Thompson calls to mind the words of wisdom scholar Robert Sternberg that “wisdom is not just about maximizing one's own or someone else's self-interest, but about balancing various self-interests (intrapersonal) with the interests of others (interpersonal) and of other aspects of the context in which one lives (extrapersonal), such as one’s city or country or environment or even God.”<sup>6</sup>

The third, fourth, fifth, and eighth essays (by Peter van den Berg, Sharda Nandram and Margot Esther Borden, Herman Siebens, and Ien G. M. van der Pol respectively) deal with varying types of leadership, including charismatic, strategic, integral, facilitating, and inclusive leadership. In discussing these different types the authors cite many empirical studies, but also more philosophical works like *If Aristotle Ran General Motors*. The authors all agree that whatever the value of the different types of leadership they mention, these types must include or be supplemented by a wisdom-directed leadership.

The essay by Nandram and Borden on “Integral Leadership” is based on the Integral Philosophy of Sri Aurobindo (1872-1950) and Ken Wilber (1949-).<sup>7</sup> In Siebens essay, “Facilitating Leadership,” he emphasizes the necessity of good decision-making—which is really the essence of wisdom—in a period of rapid change and increasing diversity. The facilitating leader displays wisdom qualities such as humility, empathy, and respect for and openness to others and their views. He or she is less interested in controlling others than in fostering their creativity and encouraging them to contribute to the decision-making process. Van der Pol’s essay on “Inclusive Leadership” agrees with this approach and also stresses the importance of leaders developing not only their physical and cognitive dimensions, but also their affective and spiritual sides.

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<sup>4</sup> A sample of Bouckaert’s thinking on the economic crisis of 2008 and the need for economic wisdom can be found in both English and Spanish online at [http://www.uca.edu.ar/uca/common/grupo12/files/Cultura\\_Econ-mica\\_n-73-74\\_FINAL.pdf](http://www.uca.edu.ar/uca/common/grupo12/files/Cultura_Econ-mica_n-73-74_FINAL.pdf).

<sup>5</sup> See, e.g., Cophorne Macdonald “The Centrality of Wisdom,” at <http://www.wisdompage.com/HOE/HeavenEssay-Macdonald.html> and his “Values,” at <http://www.wisdompage.com/valueslists.html>.

<sup>6</sup> For more on the words and thoughts of Maslow, Schumacher, and Sternberg, see my “The Wisdom of E. F. Schumacher,” at <http://www.wisdompage.com/SchumacherEssay.pdf>, 22-23, 26-27.

<sup>7</sup> At <http://www.wisdompage.com/wilber.html> wisdom scholar Macdonald has written, “One characteristic of wisdom is the ability to see the big picture and make sense of it—the ability to see the collective patterns within the myriad specific details of existence, the ability to see the forest as well as the trees. And when it comes to putting the big picture into words, no one has done a more comprehensive job of it than Ken Wilber.”

The sixth essay, by Laurent Ledoux and Mark Strom, is entitled “Arts of the Wise Leader,” the same title as a 2007 book by Strom. In writing that “wisdom can be viewed as reading the patterns of life well and applying these with insight, discernment, integrity and care,” (95) they echo what the political philosopher Isaiah Berlin and wisdom scholar Macdonald have written. Berlin wrote that political wisdom involved “an acute sense of what fits with what,” and Macdonald that “wisdom, maturity, and happiness seem to go hand in hand with figuring out how life and the world work—with discovering the nature of the rules, laws, and programming that dictate what will happen under what conditions.”<sup>8</sup> Like Macdonald, who has noted that wisdom involves integrating into one’s life the “three great value spheres” of “the Good, the True, and the Beautiful,”<sup>9</sup> the authors stress that wise leadership is “attuned to the great ideals of the classical age: Truth, Beauty and Goodness.” (100) They also emphasize the importance of wise leaders’ communication skills—“leaders generate new shared meaning and new realities through the simple human act and art of conversation.” (95)

Both this sixth essay and the seventh one (“A Hero as a Leader” by Ben Decock) mention stories and myths that go beyond rational discourse to shed light on wise leadership. Decock points out the relevance of Joseph Campbell’s 1949 *The Hero with a Thousand Faces* for understanding various phases through which a wise leader may pass.

Siebens’ essay touches on Machiavelli’s classic *Il Principe* (*The Prince*) and contrasts his opportunistic approach to R. Greenleaf’s more appealing view of “Servant Leadership.” (82) Van den Berg’s essay mentions the wise leadership of Gandhi and Mandela (51-52), and van der Pol’s contribution states that “there is a call for strong leaders not just in organisations, but in politics.” (119) And indeed, although the eight essays in this collection are primarily concerned with business leadership, there is much in them that could apply to political leadership. Many present-day politicians could benefit from reading and pondering these essays.

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<sup>8</sup> Isaiah Berlin, “Political Judgment,” in *The Sense of Reality: Studies in Ideas and Their History* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1996), 46; Copthorne Macdonald, *Toward Wisdom*, Ch. 1, at <http://www.wisdompage.com/tw-ch01.html>.

<sup>9</sup> “The Integral Vision: A Brief Introduction,” at <http://www.wisdompage.com/integralintro.html>.