

OPINION

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Capitalism is rooted in religious thought

By Denis Collins

You are one of the largest employers in the community and for the past decade you've been exporting union jobs from Wisconsin to nonunion factories in the South and Mexico. Meanwhile, the union has agreed to a host of wage concessions, including a four-year wage freeze, loss of annual \$1,200 profit-sharing payments, a \$2-an-hour wage cut and higher insurance premiums.

With profits at an all-time high of \$102 million in 1993, another 2,000 jobs are slotted for relocation to the land of cheap labor. Wanting to be humane, you notify the employees one year in advance.

A reporter for a Catholic newsweekly has the audacity to question why you and other Catholic managers would make a business decision so antithetical to your religious, educational training. In that issue's commentary column, the editor accuses you of living "in either denial or moral blindness."

How should you respond?

If you're Briggs & Stratton Corp., you wait 1½ years and then try to run the nonprofit religious newsweekly out of business! After unsuccessfully demanding that the small paper publish an unedited seven-page letter, the management team at Briggs & Stratton, a small-engine manufacturer in the Milwaukee area, has contributed to our overloaded judicial system by filing a \$30 million libel and invasion-of-privacy lawsuit against the National Catholic Reporter.

According to Vice President George Thompson III, "(our) religious upbringing has absolutely nothing to do with the basic economic decisions" made by the company.

Aaron Feuerstein, the owner of

Collins is a professor of business ethics at the UW-Madison School of Business.

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Maden Mills, thinks otherwise. After his Lawrence, Mass., textile factory burned down two weeks before Christmas last year, he kept his 1,400 employees on the payroll. Why? According to Feuerstein, his father and Jewish social teaching taught him that "in a situation which is devoid of morality, try to be a man and do something worthwhile."

When questioned further about his actions, Feuerstein said: "Even though some people thought, 'Well, he'll grab the insurance money and run,' that consideration never entered my mind. I thought rebuilding was the right thing to do and what I had to do. And then some people said I did such a saintly thing. I did a normal thing."

Should religious principles play a role when business executives make economic decisions? People like the Briggs' executives who want to park religious values outside the workplace lack the creativity and conviction to do good and make a profit. It is easier to focus on making a profit.

Two religious principles, regardless of religion, are to love God and to serve others, particularly the economically worst-off. Economic decisions must be grounded in religious or ethical principles, not the other way around. Otherwise, the altar of money is substituted for the altar of God, and serving business partners or shareholders is substituted for serving the worst-off.

Capitalism needs to be guided by religious principles to survive in the long run against competing theories of economics. Adam Smith, the Father of Capitalism, assumed business people were morally accountable to God and conscience, in addition to the law. Business people dig their own graves, burying themselves under an infinite number of governmental laws and regulation, when they deny this accountability.

General religious principles are not

the same as specific religious practices. Nor am I suggesting that managers allow religious leaders to run their organizations. Managers need to develop situational policy decisions that, as the Catholic bishops put it, "must be judged in light of whether it protects or undermines the dignity of the human person." If the policy cannot stand up to this test of principles, it's time to go back to the drawing board.

There are three lessons to be learned from the diverse reactions of Briggs' executives and Aaron Feuerstein to their religious upbringings.

First, religious principles do have a foundational role in business and politics, whether the current business and political powers like it or not. Catholics, Protestants, Jews and Muslims have every right to hold those in power accountable to foundational religious principles.

Second, we live in a democratic society, and the public arena loses its soul if these voices are excluded from discussions. Catholic newspapers have the right to criticize business decisions based on Catholic teaching, and Bishop Rembert Weakland has the right to criticize Gov. Tommy Thompson's W-2 plan based on Catholic teaching. If capitalism is to thrive, it cannot be divorced from its religious roots.

Finally, if your policy decisions are grounded in religious principles, you will gladly share your religious background with the world rather than litigate your shame away.

Business, political and personal policies will always fall short of religious principles. When this happens, we need to try again, not attack those who point out our shortcomings. Rather than having work and religious principles operate as though they inhabited parallel universes, the two need to be integrated. Every job description should include "the continual discovery of one's true self through service to others."

I guess you can sue me for libel too.