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Book Talk:
*Work Pray Code: When Work Becomes Religion in
Silicon Valley*, by Carolyn Chen
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Work has now become religion for many white-collar businesspeople in America. As their religious identity and institutional commitment have dramatically declined over several decades, they are finding their passion, sense of calling, and fulfillment in the place they spend the majority of their time. Many companies now resemble religious organizations, providing a sense of meaning, purpose, belonging, and transcendence for their employees. Much of corporate America is convinced this makes employees more productive and benefits the firm's bottom line.

These are central claims made in sociologist Carolyn Chen's book *Work Pray Code: When Work Becomes Religion in Silicon Valley*. She spent six years (2013-2019) conducting a study in the Silicon Valley of California's San Francisco Bay Area. 102 in-depth interviews were completed, half with technology professionals (engineers, executives, entrepreneurs, venture capitalists) and half with service providers (human resource people, executive coaches, meditation and yoga teachers, and various consultants). Most were White or Asian American, with a few of Latinx descent. The minority who identified as religious were almost all Protestant Christian or Buddhist. Chen also visited more than a dozen tech companies and took part in a number of related retreats, workshops, trainings, conferences, yoga classes, and meditation and mindfulness sessions. To round out her perspective, she spoke to other people in the Silicon Valley who do not work in technology, like local elected officials, teachers, day-care providers, ministers, priests, and small business owners. She believes her findings are generalizable well beyond Silicon Valley, though, to highly-skilled professionals throughout the country and to companies in other sectors and regions. "Silicon Valley helps us to see a broader trend," she explains (3).

The book is organized into five chapters, with an introduction and conclusion. It develops an argument along these lines: 1) Over two-thirds of employees at Apple, Google, and Facebook believe they are changing the world for the better and they expect their work to be meaningful. Even if they come from traditional religious backgrounds, their work requires so much of their time and effort that it becomes easy and natural to find purpose, identity, and community through their companies. 2) On the corporate side, the view has developed that providing spirituality opportunities at work is an important part of creating a holistic environment that will enhance employee productivity. "When the company takes care of the whole person, it gets the whole person," as Chen puts it (71). 3) A primary way of doing that is helping employees to connect to their "authentic selves," which can be awakened and enlivened and directed toward their work. What is discovered within each individual might be described as passion, calling, service, and even love. 4) Yet, religious traditions are now fundamentally altered, as spiritual practices like meditation become productivity practices. Employees are encouraged to become Users of religious technology for instrumental reasons. For example, development of Buddhist virtues of compassion, equanimity, and focus is

not to cultivate religiously wholesome or virtuous states, but to optimize personal performance and produce economic value for the company. 5) In fact, corporate use of Buddhism could be considered “killing the Buddha” in several senses. Chen lays out five ways that “meditation entrepreneurs” transform a religious practice into a secular business practice: hiding it by never using the “B-word,” Whitening it by erasing its Asian ethnic and devotional dimensions, making it scientifically verifiable, countering its image as relaxation and substituting language of training and conditioning for resilience and results, and making it quick and convenient.

The book’s conclusion describes the emerging “Techoptia”: where employees worship work, people find their highest fulfillment in their workplaces, high-skilled Americans are promised a new kind of “wholeness,” and the twenty-first century American Dream is realized. The downside is that an elite group of white-collar workers may be becoming “whole,” but the rest of society is left broken. Investment declines in social institutions and traditions that nurture purpose, identity, and community outside of work – families, civic associations, and traditional religion. Chen laments that “Techoptia is corroding the collective capacity to build and sustain a common good” as it “weakens the foundations for participatory democracy” (200-201). Meanwhile, religion has been co-opted, diverting resources away from those not working in the information economy and away from low-income and unemployed people. Prophetic religious traditions that “resist marketized forms of logic and exchange” are cast aside (210). What happens to religion’s ability to “offer a powerful and distinct set of ethics, communities, and rituals to counter the morally bereft religion of work?” What has happened to the religion that “can teach virtues such as justice, stewardship, kinship, and compassion, qualities that help us determine how, why and when to work; how and what to produce; and what to do with the profits of our work”?

I have three broad questions for Dr. Chen: How do your research and findings in the Silicon Valley relate to the larger Faith at Work movement in the United States? As institutional religion appears to be dying in America, why isn’t religion in the workplace a primary source of revitalization to be celebrated? And isn’t religion also having a positive effect on the business climate, making it more humane and responsive to broad social justice concerns?

The work of David Miller, Director of Princeton University’s Faith and Work Initiative, is relevant to the first question. In his book *God at Work: The History and Promise of the Faith at Work Movement* (2007), he describes the third wave of the FAW movement that first began in America in the late 1800’s. Now, starting in the mid-1980’s, substantial numbers of businesspeople are attending conferences and management seminars on spirituality and work. They participate in meditation and prayer groups, study faith and leadership together, and read books, magazines, and newsletters helping them to live integrated lives between their religious commitments and marketplace demands.

The FAW movement has become highly diverse in its third wave, comprising Christianity, Judaism, Islam, Hinduism, Buddhism, and noninstitutional forms of spirituality. A representative organization is Spirit in Business, Inc., founded in 2001 and inspired by the teachings of the Buddhist Dalai Lama. Since Christianity remains the majority religion in America, though, a lot of the movement's strength lies in primarily Protestant expressions of faith at work. The modern FAW movement has ancient theological roots in its recognition that work can be a means of honoring God and serving one's neighbor. The movement not only nurtures integration on a personal level, but also, as Miller explains, "has profound ethical and moral ramifications for corporations as a whole and life in the broader economic sphere" (6-7). He notes that there are risks, too, in the potential for discrimination and divisiveness "if religion and spiritual practices in the workplace are not implemented in inclusive and respectful ways."

What may be significantly different between the FAW movement and what Chen describes in the Silicon Valley, though, is that businesspeople are usually bringing their already-existing religion to work, rather than having it created for them by their businesses. Nonetheless, FAW gets integrated into companies' lives through formal employee religious affinity groups as well as informal meetings for prayer, scripture study, and fellowship. Religiously non-affiliated people can also be attracted and engaged in this way.

My second question relates to Chen's data on the decline of institutional religion in America. She notes that the portion of Americans claiming no religious identity in 1972 was 7 percent, but by 2018 it was 23 percent. Those who never attend religious services increased from 13 percent in 1990 to 30 percent in 2018. Meanwhile, as Laura Nash and I document in our book *Church on Sunday, Work on Monday: The Challenge of Fusing Christian Values with Business Life* (2001), there has been a revolutionary new interest in spirituality during this period, a Fourth Great Awakening of sorts, including dramatic numbers of American businesspeople developing religious understanding in relation to their working lives. We are concerned that institutional religion is disconnected from this and not taking advantage of the spirituality-in-business movement, as we call it. Why not celebrate and build on this new way that religion is being experienced and practiced, not just on the weekend but all week long? Clergy, seminaries, and congregations should be paying attention and engaging.

My third question can be illustrated by looking at former CEO (now Executive Chairman) Jeff Weiner and his company LinkedIn. According to Chen, Weiner credits his practice of "compassionate management" to inspiration from the Dalai Lama's book *The Art of Happiness*. However, she implies that Weiner's is an instrumental form of Buddhism, dedicated to production and profit. In a 2012 statement that I use in my course at the Stanford Graduate School of Business, "Finding Religious and Spiritual Meaning at Work: Business Exemplars," Weiner

says that the personal vision statement he drafted as he came to LinkedIn from Yahoo was (and still is) “To expand the world’s collective wisdom and compassion.” He means that on the individual, corporate, and society-wide levels. In managing, he aspires to listen closely to others, put himself in their shoes, and understand what in their background and experience has led them to take a particular position. On a corporate level, he wants his firm to organize information, make it accessible, and move it from mere knowledge to wisdom. On a societal level, he is deeply committed to educational reform at all levels, inside and outside of LinkedIn, to produce a more compassionate world. There are myriad dimensions to this, including social justice concerns of battling discrimination and protecting the natural environment. Aren’t there many people and companies in corporate America who find in religion and spirituality a genuine way both to do well and do good?

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Author’s Reply by Carolyn Chen

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I am grateful to Rev. McLennan for his close reading of my book and his thoughtful reflection. His response asks me to consider whether religion in the workplace can benefit employees’ faith lives and help to create more ethical and just companies. Moreover, given the decline in traditional religion in the United States, he suggests that clergy and religious people should celebrate the flourishing of workplace spirituality and engage with companies. These are important and timely questions, especially for religious and spiritual leaders, and all people who seek an integrated faith and work life.

Before I begin, I want to identify some important analytical distinctions between the sphere of Rev. McLennan’s questions and the focus of my study. My research focused on the company-provided spirituality offered through programs

such as meditation and mindfulness, professional development, wellness and executive coaching. I did not directly study the employee-led religious groups that McLennan is curious about. His questions are about people who are religious. Most of my research participants, however, were not religious. While my book does not directly address how religious organizations and leaders can best support the spiritual lives of professionals, I believe my work offers some insights and raises questions that scholars and practitioners alike may consider.

McLennan asks how my work relates to the Faith at Work movement and employee-led religious affinity groups. As he notes, that these groups are *employee-led* is an important distinction from the corporate-sponsored spirituality I studied. Even though most companies invited employees to “bring your whole self to work” and to be authentic at work, most religious tech workers were uncomfortable expressing their faith in the workplace. People across religious traditions described themselves as being “in the closet” about their religion. In this environment, employee-led (rather than company-led) religious/spiritual groups such as Bible studies, prayer groups, and meditation groups supported religious workers in living out their faith at work. I felt that these employee-led (rather than company-led) religious/spiritual affinity groups were the most promising spaces within the workplace for employees to support one another and express their spiritual and faith lives authentically and freely. These groups, however, could also be uncomfortable for people who shared them with their bosses or subordinates.

Most of the religious tech workers I studied did not participate in workplace religious affinity groups. Why? Because they had no time. They were already actively involved in faith communities outside of work, and they didn’t have the time for one at work. Time and energy are scarce resources for busy professionals. Religious tech workers were especially disciplined about managing their time at work. They made work strictly about work in order to ration their time and energy for their churches, temples, and mosques. Religious tech workers were less likely to pursue hobbies and join social clubs at work than others. Compared to non-religious tech workers, they had fewer close friends at work. Religious workers chose to be *less integrated* at work, in order to be *more integrated* with communities outside of work. Religious tech workers had good reasons to spend their time belonging to a church or temple rather than a religious affinity group at work. Since most tech workers changed jobs every 3 years or so, they’d established much deeper relationships within their faith communities than in their workplaces. Mosques, temples, and churches offered multidimensional resources that tech companies may not provide, such as ethnic community, support in raising families, and opportunities to meet women. And finally, their congregations gave them communities free of deadlines, evaluations, and having to prove themselves. These personal decisions to join a community within the workplace or outside of it had

larger social consequences – to build either the social capital of the workplace or the social capital of the community.

Many religious tech workers talked about integrating their religion and work by practicing virtues such as compassion, patience, and love with their co-workers. But most had a hard time articulating the spiritual or ethical significance of their work. Like the businessmen in Bradley C. Smith's book *Baptizing Business*, most tech workers did not connect their work to broader social justice concerns. It's here where religions could help companies "do well and do good," as McLennan writes. I share his belief that when people live out their faiths in the workplace, they have the potential to help companies be more ethical and just. Religious leaders can help professionals do this by articulating a theology of work and supporting the work lives of their members, as McLennan suggests the Faith at Work movement does. But the question remains, should clergy do this in the workplace, and if so, what are the costs?

McLennan argues that at a moment when traditional religion is in decline, clergy and religious leaders should celebrate the flourishing of workplace spirituality and engage with workplaces. The workplace spiritual providers I studied agreed. But for many, spiritually serving the workplace was less a cause for celebration than a gritty survival strategy in a work-worshipping society such as Silicon Valley. Religious leaders of all faiths said that their congregations were suffering because people were too busy with work. To accommodate, clergy started up programs in the workplace such as meditation programs and Bible studies. But all of them had to compromise the teaching, the practice, the ethics, or the community in some way to fit into the workplace. The compromises were smaller for those involved in employee-led affinity groups compared to those involved in company-sponsored programs. Some dharma teachers I interviewed refused to teach in corporations. Others didn't have a choice. They couldn't afford to live in the Bay Area unless they taught at a place like Google. In the end, every spiritual and religious provider had to contend with the specter of what one person described as "being owned by work."

This is what happens in Silicon Valley's "Techtopia." The tech industry and its work-worshipping culture have such a strong grip on society that families, communities, and religions naturally bend to its desires and needs. The problem is, we've become so used to it that we don't even notice it anymore. Explaining why he taught meditation in tech companies, one Buddhist monk said, "because people are too busy to take care of themselves and their families." His answer was pragmatic and compassionate. He was meeting people where they were: at the workplace. But what if we stepped back to look at the larger ecosystem that conditions tech workers' choices about how they spend their time and energy? We'd find an ecosystem where it makes better sense to spend time working than caring for self and family. We'd find an ecosystem where it makes better sense for

a monk to teach meditation in a company rather than in a temple, a park, or a community center. How might religious leaders respond best to this system rather than to merely its casualties?

For those who live in Silicon Valley and other knowledge-industry hubs, my book tries to name the water that we swim in. It shows how work wields its power over even the most intimate parts of our selves, our souls. The problem with Techtopia isn't that workplaces are bad, or even good, for that matter. Rather, work institutions are limited in offering the traditions, practices, ethics, and liturgies for a flourishing society. For that, we need a diversity of institutions to thrive *independently* of work – these are our families, unions, arts organizations, education, and also religious and spiritual communities. But when work colonizes these institutions, we all lose out.

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