

Entrepreneurship: Spreading the Spirit of Enterprise

 transforming business

by Peter S Heslam



Faith in Business is co-organizing a conference on Entrepreneurship in March with Transforming Business, directed by Peter Heslam at Cambridge University. Here he provokes new thinking on entrepreneurship and invokes the spirit of enterprise.

When the *Oxford Dictionary of Quotations* published its list of the top 101 sayings of 2002, it included a remark that George W. Bush is said to have made to Tony Blair: ‘The problem with the French is that they have no word for “entrepreneur”’.

Whether this remark was a joke by the former US President, or whether it was fabricated to poke fun at him, remains unresolved. But it highlights the origin of the term in the French *entreprendre* – ‘to undertake’ – which when it first appeared in English as ‘entrepreneur’ was connoted with rather unsavoury commercial dealings.

The term only escaped this stigma during the Thatcher-Reagan era, when ‘entrepreneur’ came to designate the risk-takers and business-builders spearheading the market economy. By the end of the 1980s, ‘entrepreneur’ was more than ten times as common in newspaper articles as it had been in the 1950s and business schools began offering courses in ‘entrepreneurship’.

The rise of the term entrepreneur reflects a worldwide entrepreneurial revolution. Employers now test potential recruits for entrepreneurial mindsets; opinion formers frequently posit the enterprise culture as the most promising route to reduced crime and CO₂ emissions; and church leaders are validating pioneer forms of ministry that give birth to fresh expressions of church.

But there are three reasons for celebrating and encouraging entrepreneurship that are frequently overlooked yet have supreme importance today.

First, entrepreneurship represents the best antidote to poverty. While the development community, focused primarily on aid, debt relief and the reform of global institutions, shows signs of accepting this, their interest is generally restricted to micro-credit, fair trade, social enterprise, corporate philanthropy and Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR).

Micro-enterprise can indeed help poor people achieve subsistence,

provide for their families and secure them against abject poverty; fair trade can bring benefits to certain producer groups; social enterprise can make community projects more sustainable; and corporate philanthropy or CSR initiatives can help multinationals (MNCs) increase their pro-poor impact.

Of much greater long-term significance, however, are core activities of mainstream commercial enterprise. Key here are small and medium-sized enterprises, which are the world’s foremost creators of jobs, wealth and opportunity, making healthy contributions to gross domestic product in many of the developing economies that are growing. The commercial operations of MNCs in low-income countries can also help, not only by stimulating the conditions needed for local enterprise, but also because they can use efficiencies of scale to supply goods and services that are within the purchasing power of those at the bottom of the economic pyramid. Three quarters of Vodafone’s new

customers, for example, are in low-income countries.

Entrepreneurship has great potential, secondly, in peace-building. As I addressed this issue in vol 11.3 of this journal, it cannot detain us here, though Pope Benedict XVI made it the focus of his 2009 New Year message, which happened to coincide with Israel's retaliatory campaign against militants in Gaza. His vision reflects that of earlier generations in this region, whose hopes for peace were often tied to the vision of the coming messianic age, in which trade had a key role (Is 60:5; Jer 32), and to the value of productive labour (1 Thess 4:11-12). As Pope Paul VI put it: 'the new name for peace is development'.

Third, entrepreneurship offers the best hope in economic downturns. While no state programmes are required to initiate entrepreneurship, governments that assist redundant but entrepreneurial workers to set up in business get good value for money - the average cost of a start-up is less than the average annual cost of keeping a student at university, a prisoner in jail or a family on welfare.

Stimulating entrepreneurship in the midst of recession could help advance meritocracy, as entrepreneurship is largely independent of race, gender and class. And whereas in many

workplaces, careers are thwarted by whimsical managers, there's little to stop entrepreneurs once the spirit of enterprise has been awakened within them. Taking what amounts to a step of faith, they mobilise their talents, knowledge and judgement in pursuit of a vision of how a problem can be solved or an opportunity exploited for the sake of a better tomorrow.

This is an expression of the elusive but all-important 'spirit of enterprise'. While commercial and technical skills are necessary, attitudes, habits, beliefs, worldviews, relational and emotional competencies and qualities of character are crucial for entrepreneurship to be a driver of human development and progress. For the spirit of

enterprise is as much about passion, imagination, determination, discipline, motivation and vision as it is about technical competence.

Does the spirit of enterprise bear any relation to the Holy Spirit? Surely so, if

the fruit of the spirit of enterprise includes the prosperity, peace and opportunity outlined above and if a craftsman can be filled with God's spirit to devise artistic designs (Ex 31.1-11). Moreover, if the spirit of enterprise involves innovation, service and responsible risk-taking, the God pictured in the opening scene of the Hebrew scriptures overflows in all three,

reflected ultimately in his creation of human beings and his invitation to them to join his start-up as stewards of the earth and as forgers of culture and civilization.

Whatever the truth about President Bush's purported statement about the French, he almost certainly would agree with President Obama's apparent belief in the culture-forming potency of the spirit of enterprise, reflected in these excerpts from his inauguration speech: 'It has been the risk-takers, the doers, the makers of things...who have carried us up the long, rugged path towards prosperity and freedom.... Our workers are no less productive than when this crisis began. Our minds are no less inventive, our goods and services no less needed.... Our capacity remains undiminished.... [The] power [of the market] to generate wealth and expand freedom is unmatched.... It is precisely this spirit [of service] that must inhabit us all.... Faith and determination... hard work and honesty, courage and fair play, tolerance and curiosity.... They have been the quiet force of progress throughout our history.'

Entrepreneurs spreading the spirit of enterprise are helping to turn what biblical writers may have called a time of decision or judgement (*krisis*) into what they would have regarded as a moment of opportunity (*kairos*). In doing so, they deserve all support. ■

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