**Decision-making as a spiritual process**

**Luk Bouckaert, KULeuven & SPES Forum**

The most used method of decision making in economics is the rational cost-benefit analysis. However the method presupposes that all relevant data on costs and benefits are known. *Quod non*. The unpredictable and the creative can never be fully captured empirically. We need other methods to anticipate what is not yet there or to evaluate what cannot yet be measured.

In his *Spiritual Exercises* (1548) Ignatius of Loyola distinguishes two ways of arriving at a sound choice. The first he calls *the discernment of spirits*. Basically, this approach entails the individual examining his deeper moods when considering the range of options open to him and trying to imagine which of these options would most likely lead to an enlargement of the spirit (*dilatatio*) or inner comfort (*consolatio*). In other words, this approach principally emphasises what happens with and to the individual during a process of choice. The second relies on the *ratio*, which systematically lists the advantages and disadvantages of each option so as to weigh up what, in the long term, would be the most favourable solution. This last type of consideration can be found in rational-choice theory. Ignatius regarded the spiritual and rational approaches as complementary, but the spiritual as being the most decisive in making choices of great importance, where we commit ourselves to a relatively unknown future and are dependent of our deeper, inner compass. I believe that this field of spiritual-based decision-making in business is largely unexplored[[1]](#footnote-1).

In his *Guide for the perplexed* F. Schumacher (author of the well known *Small is Beautiful*) explains very well why we need spirituality in the context of economic and political decision making. He makes the distinction between convergent and divergent problems. Convergent problems are problems that can be designed and solved as technical or rational problems. At the end there is one optimal solution. On the contrary divergent problems cannot be solved on logical grounds or by optimization procedures because the actors think and act from different and opposite value premises. To be solved, they require a capacity to engage in an existential and empathic dialogue in order to disclose common ground for action. To quote Schumacher: “Divergent problems cannot be solved in the sense of establishing a ‘correct formula’; they can, however, be transcended. A pair of opposites – like freedom and order – are opposites at the level of ordinary life, but they cease to be opposites at the higher level, the really *human* level, where self-awareness plays its proper role. It is then that such higher forces as love and compassion, understanding and empathy, become available, not simply as occasional impulses (which they are at the lower level) but as a regular and reliable resource.” (Schumacher 2004: 126).

In my contribution I will combine the insights of Ignatius of Loyola and of the modern economist F. Schumacher to explore the role of spirituality as an *heuristic to solve unsolvable problems or to anticipate the emergent future.*

1. There are of course some interesting exceptions. Daniel Goleman, author of the bestseller *Emotional Intelligence*, studied the older spiritual methods of discernment of spirits before developing his concept of emotional intelligence. His basic assumption is that feelings and emotions help us discern what really matters. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)