



Tradition as a Lens to Interpret Approaches to Leadership: Insights from the Third Sector

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This is an unpublished conference paper for the 12th Annual Jubilee Centre for Character and Virtues conference at Oriel & Magdalene Colleges, Oxford University, Thursday 4th – Saturday 6th January 2024.

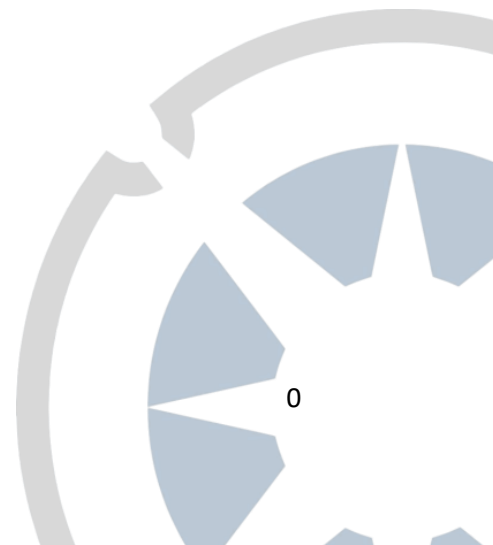
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Tradition as a Lens to Interpret Approaches to Leadership: Insights from the Third Sector

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Abstract: Existing leadership theories have commonly implied that such approaches can be understood and applied with consistency, irrespective of the leader's personal character, background, and beliefs. This paper presents an alternative perspective through which to interpret approaches to leadership by presenting data from leaders working for two Christian homelessness charities. These accounts suggest that an individual's understanding of and approach to leadership and the required virtues are significantly determined by the traditions, as understood by Alasdair MacIntyre, to which they belong, because traditions supply agents with the resources to employ in practical reasoning. The paper concludes with some suggestions for future research.

Leader 1: Everybody is a valuable individual made in God's image who deserves love and safety and a home and support. And I believe we're part of that, and I'm part of that, and we as an organisation are part of that. So that to me then means constant improvements. What can we do better? How can we do things differently? And how can we listen more to what the residents want? How can we how can we improve our support provision?

Leader 2: I have gone on a trajectory where, if you know a little bit about the organisations that I've worked for, that have become less and less explicitly Christian, or more and more nuanced and subtle, in

the way that that ethos operates...I suppose it's my theology but it's also just my desire to be a Christian in the real world...I think Brian McLaren talks about generous orthodoxy and that's something that really resonates with me...by that I mean orthodoxy in the sense of being a Christian, be unashamed about that, being a Christian within the historic traditions of Christianity and biblical traditions of Christianity, but nevertheless being very generous with that, open-minded, outward-facing, welcoming.

Leader 3: The servant leadership of Jesus, that has got to be one if not *the* main driving focus for my approach to how I work with and for colleagues. See, my role is about working for people, they're not working for me, I work for them. That's what servant leadership is about, isn't it?

The above quotations were taken from CEOs and senior leaders from two Christian youth homelessness charities based in the United Kingdom, each of whom were committed Christians. The quotes suggest that these individuals' personal faith provided premises that inform their approaches to leadership. Leader 1 suggested that her belief that each individual was made in the image of God led her to the conclusion that the young people the charity helped deserved their best efforts, which meant that she aimed to make constant improvements to the service. Leader 2 grew up in a family of Christian international missionaries, and although he was determined not to work for a Christian organisation when entering working life, he ended up working for several faith-based charities. But his upbringing taught him that he did not want to be in a Christian bubble, and as a result he aimed to work to make the charities he worked for less explicitly Christian in the way that they operated, whilst still having an unapologetically Christian ethos. Finally, Leader 3 was the most explicit in tracing his approach back to his faith, stating that his faith was to a significant degree based on the servant leadership of Jesus Christ, believing that he worked for his staff, as opposed to them working for him.

These quotes suggest a more intimate relationship between systems of belief and leadership practice than are presupposed by secular approaches to leadership, including the popular transformational and transactional leadership binary. One implication is that such approaches cannot be selected, understood and applied with consistency regardless of a leader's pre-existing beliefs. Instead, the quotes indicate that

these leaders' personal narratives informed their understandings of the purpose and practice of leadership, which in these cases were based on their Christian faith.

In their recent paper on 'work as a calling', Wightman, Potts, and Beadle (2023) recently argued that there is a dissonance between expressivist and tradition-based accounts of calling. The former suggests that individuals need only *feel* called, whilst the latter places the concept within the context of particular kinds of communities and emphasises the role of an external caller. They suggest that the current confusion among conceptualisations of calling can be understood through MacIntyre's theory of tradition-constituted rationality, for traditions provide their adherents with resources (i.e. language and beliefs) through which they understand what it means to be called. Similarly, this conference paper suggests that traditions also supply leaders with an understanding of good leadership and the virtues to achieve it. In drawing on Christian beliefs, the leaders in my study employed the resources of Christian tradition in reasoning about the purposes and practices of leadership and also as to the goods whose pursuit should animate their career choices.

The three quotes featured at the outset of this paper were taken from interviews collected as part of the author's doctoral thesis. This sought to investigate how tradition affected the understanding of meaningfulness that individuals derive from and pursue through their work via a comparative case study into Christian and secular youth homelessness charities based in the United Kingdom. For this study, the researcher interviewed a selection of employees, managers, and CEOs across three charities. The participants were a mixture of practicing Christians, people who grew up with exposure to the Christian or Catholic faith but no longer practiced, and individuals who had no personal connection to Christianity either currently or previously. Because of the large body of existing research that has emphasized the role of leadership and organisations in meaningful work (Frémeaux & Pavageau, 2022; Lysova, Allan, Dik, Duffy, & Steger, 2019; Vu & Gill, 2022), the researcher asked the managers and CEOs (herein to be collectively referred to as *leaders*) several questions about how and why they went into leadership and how they would describe their approach to leadership and decision-making.

This paper focuses only on the tradition of Christianity and utilises data from a small number of participants, and so its limited aim is to suggest a new avenue through which to research and interpret

approaches to leadership. With perhaps the exception of authentic leadership, many conventional leadership styles seem to imply that a leader's approach can be detached from their character, because they neglect to acknowledge that a leader's understanding of their responsibility as a leader may be interpreted differently according to the tradition of belief that acts as a primary influence, whether acknowledged explicitly (as here) or not. This paper suggests that researchers should examine the personal narratives that inform leader's self-understanding. This approach to embedding leadership within an understanding of tradition and personal narrative is at odds with an understanding of leadership as being both independent of wider belief system and of leadership approaches being available, as if off the shelf for any agent to adopt. By contrast, appreciation of the complexities of leadership can provide more fruitful and insightful findings (Tsoukas, 2017).

This paper illustrates this tradition-informed understanding of leadership through the personal narratives of a subset of my participants, labelled as Leaders 1, 2 and 3, who, as mentioned earlier were Christian CEOs or senior leaders working for one of two Christian youth homelessness charities. Leaders 1 and 2 worked for Organisation A, and Leader 3 worked for Organisation B. Organisation A is a national Christian charity that works to address both the immediate needs and root causes of homelessness. They run 17 different projects across the UK, each of which runs one of four services: training and skills development, housing accommodation, domestic abuse support, and crisis support. The charity is underpinned by the Christian faith which drove their mission and is a subsidiary of a wider Christian movement, under which are three other organisations that work in education, human trafficking, and international social action. All share the Christian ethos of Organisation A. Organisation A was founded in 1985 and joined this movement in 2014. They employ around 100 employees, roughly 50% of whom claim to be practicing Christians. Organisation B is also a branch of a wider organisation. Both Organisation B and the wider organisation of which it is part hold Christian values and a Christian ethos. The charity was founded in 1879 but the wider organisation has been operating since 1844. As well as providing social housing, Organisation B also conduct youth and community work and run a gym, café, nursery, and other projects assisting young people. It employs around 90 members of staff, approximately 10% of whom are practicing Christians.

For these leaders, not only their approach to leadership but also their initial decision to work for the charity was informed by their Christian beliefs. Leader 1 joined the charity over 20 years ago as a support worker after she completed her university degree. Initially she was looking to work for a Christian organisation during her gap year helping young people, but she felt God telling her to stay for another three years. During this time, she was promoted to a management role, but after these three years she submitted her notice, despite not having another position to move into elsewhere. A vacancy then arose for a similar position in a different project within the charity which she was asked to fill temporarily, considering she had experience in the role and did not need to leave immediately for a new post. After accepting the role, she has since “always felt like God was saying ‘this is where you're supposed to be’”. She described her work as “God’s calling, I believe, on my life”.

Whilst Leader 1 worked her way up to leadership from being a frontline worker and so her entire working career took place within that one organisation, Leader 2 joined the charity as CEO after he had held various leadership positions for different Christian charities. Whilst he found that leadership was something that he could do “reasonably well, and something that I quite enjoy”, this was never his primary goal. Instead, he claimed that his main driver in life was his faith:

I've always been driven by my faith, there's no question I still am. It's the thing that motivates me in my life, it's the most important thing in my life, I don't mean in some kind of abstract way, I mean literally it is the most important thing in my life, my relationship with God is. And therefore, it governs all decisions, the significant decisions, sometimes even day to day decisions, but mostly, you know, in a teleological way, it governs the big decisions of where I'm going. And so, if I was working in a bank, that would still be the case.

It was not therefore the fact that the organisation was faith-based that was the principal consideration for Leader 2's applying for the role (although he added that he had come to realise that working for a Christian charity could be a “real bonus”), rather he joined the charity predominantly because it was where he felt God wanted him to be.

Whilst Leaders 1 and 2 had almost exclusively worked for Christian charities in their adult working lives, Leader 3 was working for a professional football club when he was approached by the

CEO of the Christian charity he later went onto join. When asked about this career the motivation for joining the charity, he said:

Two things really. One was realigning work-life balance...And the other one, and they're not in any order, the other one was around my faith...the values of the organisation aligned with my own personal values more than where I was.

These accounts suggest that for these individuals, their faith provided a foundation for a number of decisions alongside their approach to leadership. What then of the virtues? One notable feature of these leader narratives was their exemplification of several infused virtues, as understood in the Thomistic tradition. Aquinas followed Aristotle in acknowledging the four cardinal virtues (courage, temperance, wisdom and justice), but following the teaching of Saint Paul, he added three infused (that is given by grace) theological virtues of faith, hope, and charity (Foot, 2002). This paper will continue by an illustration of the role played by these virtues in Leader 1's personal narrative.

Aquinas defined a virtue as "good quality of the mind, by which we live righteously, of which no one can make bad use, which God works in us, without us" (STI-II, Q. 55, A. 4). Whilst philosophers have gone on to provide secular understandings of the virtues, including some of the theological virtues (Snow, 2013), for Aquinas, God is central to the notion of a virtue, and this was apparent in Leader 1's account. In her retelling of how she submitted her resignation notice after three years without a new role to move onto, due to the belief that God had told her she was going to work there for no longer or shorter than that period, Leader 1 exhibited the virtue of hope. This was not an abstract sense of hope, but a hope that God would provide for her, a hope that she trusted in so greatly that she risked unemployment by following what she believed to be God's plan for her.

During her time as a support worker, prior to moving into management and leadership positions, Leader 1 spoke of the sacrifices she had to make for her work, largely in terms of work-life balance. She explained:

We've been away for weekends and had to come home, get back in the car and drive an hour to come and do an eviction because something's happened or it's come and cover a shift because someone hasn't turned up and they can't get anyone

Here, Leader 1 appeared to demonstrate the virtue of charity in that she was willing to sacrifice her personal life for her work and the young people she served. She was willing to make such sacrifices because she viewed her work as her “life’s calling”. Whilst she acknowledged that for some people who did not identify as Christian, the idea of a calling may be understood as the “coming together of your skills and your passion”, she stated that “if you have faith like me, then for me there's that extra God element of believing that that's what God wants me to do”. Here, there is clear evidence of the virtue of faith. There is further evidence of this in Leader 1’s approach to decision-making, as when asked how she made decisions, she responded saying “particularly if they’re massive decisions, then prayerfully”.

These leaders’ approaches to leadership, their career choices, and their understanding of certain virtues appeared to be underpinned by concepts and beliefs belonging to the Christian tradition. On MacIntyre’s (2007, p. 222) account, a tradition is a “historically extended, socially embodied argument, and an argument precisely in part about the goods which constitute that tradition”. This notion of tradition-constituted rationality has recently begun to inform business ethics research (Vu & Burton, 2022) and this paper provides further evidence that at least some leaders’ personal narratives and virtues are intimately related to their self-understanding as bearers of a tradition (MacIntyre, 2007).

On this account, the social roles we inherit or adopt – as members of a particular family, city, nation, profession, provide us with a “moral starting point”, for “what is good for me has to be the good for one who inhabits these roles”, MacIntyre (2007, p. 220) writes. Lutz (2020) suggests that most people remain in the traditions they inherit due to complacency, ideological fervour, or reluctance to challenge to their own beliefs, but MacIntyre encourages his readers to remain open to the idea that their beliefs may be wrong and to engage in a continuous search for the truth (MacIntyre, 1977). Traditions supply agents with the resources, the language and beliefs, by which they interpret concepts and moral arguments, and which they employ in their practical reasoning. Consequently, in contrast to other philosophers who attempt to form timeless truths, MacIntyre (1988, p. 346) argues that:

there is no such neutral ground...no place for appeals to a practical-rationality- as-such...to which all rational persons would by their very rationality be compelled to give their allegiance. There is instead only the practical- rationality-of-this-or-that-tradition

MacIntyre argues that virtues are required to sustain traditions. Just as MacIntyre encourages individuals to question their own beliefs to develop their reasoning, those at the level of tradition-building must similarly aim to progress the beliefs of the tradition by engaging in cycles of “questioning, doubting, formulating hypotheses, confirming, disconfirming and so on” (MacIntyre, 1998, p. 207). A tradition that does not attempt to identify discrepancies or inadequacies in its claims is either “dying or dead” (MacIntyre, 2007, p. 222), and so the “Lack of justice, lack of truthfulness, lack of courage, lack of the relevant intellectual virtues - these corrupt traditions” (p. 223). To engage in such processes of questioning one’s beliefs requires the possession of an additional virtue, “the virtue of having an adequate sense of the traditions to which one belongs or which confront one” (MacIntyre, 2007, p. 223).

Traditions and the virtues are also connected in one other important sense according to MacIntyre, for he argues that what are considered virtues and how individual virtues are interpreted and defined is subject to the tradition to which the interpreter belongs. This paper has exemplified Christianity as one such tradition, albeit one with a highly specific understanding of the origins and functions of the virtues. MacIntyre (2007) identifies several other traditions of the virtues including the medieval tradition, the republican tradition, and the modern tradition.

If alternative approaches to leadership are to be understood as expressions of and perhaps as contributors to distinctive traditions, then there are many directions that future research could take. Firstly, considering this conference paper only considered the tradition of Christianity, scholars may be interested to investigate other traditions. This project investigated Christianity because religion is a particularly visible type of tradition considering the contrast to secular living, and because Christian-based organisations are more common in the UK than other religions. Future research may want to consider other religious traditions or other types of tradition, such as traditions of practice and profession inasmuch as they influence approaches to leadership. Researchers are also encouraged to investigate further the relationship between leadership approaches and personal narratives by seeking out negative instances where there

appears to be compartmentalisation between the leader's approach to leadership and their personal values and beliefs. Finally, this research project also revealed (although not reported in this paper) that where the traditions of the leaders were incongruent with the followers, conflict appeared more likely to arise.

Scholars may therefore be interested in how tradition can cause conflict in organisations, in a negative but also in a constructive sense.

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