

Thou shalt not fail? Using theological impulses to critique the heroic bias in transformational leadership theory

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ABSTRACT

Leaders whose mistakes are made public are often under pressure to relinquish their positions. The expectation that true leaders should be infallible is particularly pronounced in transformational leadership theory. Its heroic bias seems to point towards a conception of leadership that is at odds with the inevitability of human failure. In this article, we use impulses from Protestant theology to identify and critique the heroic bias in transformational leadership theory. We use theory from beyond leadership scholarship and from beyond its conventional Anglophone locations, to show that fallibility does not necessarily disable leaders from contributing to transformational changes. We show that the acknowledgement of leaders'

fallibility has the potential to correct unrealistic and problematic views of leaders' influence, correct utopian expectations of processes of change, and empower followers.

KEYWORDS

Transformational leadership; heroic bias; leadership and religion; transformational leadership criticism; Jürgen Moltmann; leadership theory and theology

Introduction: Failing to include failure?

Do leaders make mistakes?

In the public imagination, it often seems as if leadership and failure are mutually exclusive. Leaders are expected to inspire and motivate by setting an example that should be emulated by their followers. The failure to live up to these expectations seems to make them less follow-able and thus weakens their perceived leadership. The media is replete with examples of such 'fallen' leaders.

However, even our common sense alerts us to the fact that this is a strange, even irrational, expectation. It is obvious that all humans tend to fail and make mistakes. Unrealistic public expectations of leaders can, at least partly, be ascribed to unrealistic theories of leadership. In this article, we argue the heroic bias in transformational leadership theory is one such unrealistic expectation. According to our reading of the literature, its heroic bias fails to acknowledge and integrate the inevitability of human failure. We use theory developed by Jürgen Moltmann, arguably one of the most important Protestant German theologians of the twentieth century, as impulse for identifying and expanding the critique of the heroic bias in

transformational leadership theory. We also use his to work indicate why the inevitability of human failure does not necessarily invalidate approaches to leadership that emphasise the link with different forms of transformation.

We start our article by emphasising the main contours of transformational leadership theory. This we use as a basis for discussion of the critique of its heroic bias. We then turn to Moltmann's theory. Of particular interest is the critique of the 'personality cult'. This provides a point of entry into his theology that allows us to include human fallibility into the necessity for, and possibility of continued processes of, transformation. In the final section, we use figures of thought developed by Moltmann to deepen the critique of the heroic bias of transformational leadership theory. We suggest ways in which this weakness can be addressed, even though we remain uncertain about the extent to which it is possible to rehabilitate the heroic bias in transformational leadership theory.

Our attempt at using theological impulses to identify and correct inadequacies of a decidedly non-theological theory follows selected patterns of thought of 'political theology'. Key impulses were later further developed by Giorgio Agamben in *The Kingdom and the Glory* (2007). Simon Critchley has more recently expounded the approach and meanings of political theology in *The Faith of the Faithless: Experiments in Political Theology* (2012). Political theology essentially uncovers, or in some instances recovers, underlying theological conceptions in 'secular' political and economic theories.¹ According to Sørensen, Spoelstra, Höpfl and Critchley (2012), political theology, when applied to the study of organisations, can be called a 'theology of the organisation'.

¹ This short genealogy of political theology draws on the work of the South African theologian, Dirk Smit.

The theology of an organisation is expressed in three ways. Such a theology, firstly, views 'modern concepts of organisation' as 'secularised theological concepts' (Sørensen et al., 2012: 274). The second form of this 'theology' does not seek to find the 'theological twin' of 'secularised concepts', but shows 'how theological concepts have transferred directly into organisational discourse without changing their name' (Sørensen et al., 2012: 274). The third form of the theology of organisation seeks to 'redeem the relevance' of 'theological concepts that have lost their relevance for [an] organisation' (2012: 275).

In this article we follow, broadly, an approach similar to this third form of a theology of an organisation. We use a collection of theological concepts – notably sin, idolatry, crucifixion and resurrection – to identify and interpret the heroic bias in transformational leadership theory.

Having said this, we can now turn to a discussion of the heroic bias of transformational leadership theory.

Transformational leadership and its heroic basis

In 1985 Bernard Bass expressed the hope that his book *Leadership and performance beyond expectations* 'will represent a major breakthrough in understanding what it takes for leaders to have great effects on their followers' (Bass, 1985: xiii). More than 30 years after the publication of this book it is clear that his confidence was not unwarranted. Despite an observable diffusion of themes and approaches (cf. Dinh et al., 2014), including an expansion in critical approaches from outside Europe and the United States (Fourie et al., 2016), transformational leadership arguably remains the dominant approach to the phenomenon of leadership. Amongst transformational leadership theorists Bass's work remains a classic exposition of the theory of transformational leadership (cf. also Podsakoff et al., 1990; Rafferty and Griffin, 2004; Conger and Kanungo, 1998; Van Knippenberg and Sitkin, 2013).

In order to understand and appreciate the heroic bias in transformational leadership theory reference should be made to two precursors to Bass's agenda-setting book. Even though the coinage of the term 'transformational leadership' is commonly attributed to James Downton (1973), R. J. A. House's research on charismatic leadership (1977) and James Burns's work on transactional and transformational leadership (1978) are commonly viewed as the most important sources for Bass's theory on transformational leadership. Bass credits House with recognising the 'possible conceptual value of charisma to the organisational sciences' (Bass, 1985: 35). The importance of charismatic leadership is clearly reflected in Bass's own work. Of even greater importance, however, is the extent to which Bass incorporates Burns's distinction between transactional and transformational leadership.

Burns describes leadership, in a slightly confusing way, as 'an aspect of power', even though it should also be conceived of as 'a separate and vital process in itself' (Burns, 1978: 18). For Burns the key distinction between naked power and leadership lies in the purposes served. Whereas naked power is about realising the purposes of the wielders of power, 'whether or not these are also the goals of the respondents', leaders 'tap followers' motives in order to realise the purposes of both leaders and followers' (Burns, 1978: 18). Leaders manage to do this in two ways. Transactional leadership entails making contact with others – potential followers – with a view to exchanging valued things in order to align goals (Burns, 1978: 19). These exchanges can be economic, political, cultural or psychological in value and do not refer only to the exchange of tangible goods. According to Burns, transformational leadership is a more aspirational and moral endeavour. It constitutes the fusion of 'separate but related' purposes, and signifies leaders' ability to '[change] the makeup of the followers' motive base through gratifying their motives' (Burns, 1978: 21).

Bass builds on Burns's conceptualisation, and proceeds to identify characteristics of both transactional and transformational leaders. Even though his theory has seen many revisions in the past three decades, these characteristics remain instructive for those seeking to understand the core movements of his work. Transactional leaders, according to Bass, are cognisant of what followers want to get from a particular relationship, and they try to ensure that followers get what they want, provided their performance contributes to what the leader wants from the relationship. This 'responsiveness' to followers' self-interest is leveraged for performance (Bass, 1985: 11). Transformational leaders achieve transformation by 'raising [the] level of consciousness about the importance and value of designated outcomes', enabling followers 'to transcend [their] own self-interest for the sake of the team, organisation, or larger polity' by, amongst other things, 'altering [their] need level ... or expanding [their] portfolio of needs and wants' (Bass, 1985: 20). A key assumption in Bass's theory on transformational leadership has remained largely stable as more theorists have entered the debate. Transformational leaders are aware of the 'issues of consequence' in a respective setting and are able to change the behaviours of followers to adequately respond to what is 'right or good' and not 'popular or acceptable according to the established wisdom of the time' (Bass, 1985: 17). Transformational leaders make transformation in groups, organisations and even societies possible by transforming the goals of followers.

In later works Bass, often in collaboration with Bruce Avolio, famously explicated theory on transformational and transactional leadership in terms of 'factors of leadership'. According to this conceptualisation, transformational leaders evince four factors of transformational leadership, namely 'idealised influence', 'inspirational motivation', 'intellectual stimulation' and 'individualised consideration' (Bass and Avolio, 1993: 51–52).

Heroic bias

The theory of transformational leadership, particularly as expounded in its now classic form by Bass and Avolio, has not been without its critics. One of the most severe criticisms relate to its lack of conceptual clarity. In their recent extended criticism of transformational leadership Daan van Knippenberg and Sim Sitkin echo Gary Yukl's earlier charge that the boundaries of the concept 'transformational leadership' and the interrelationship of its constituent elements are not clear (Van Knippenberg and Sitkin, 2013: 10). Yukl highlights the ambiguity of the distinction between transformational factors and the concomitant behaviours. Each factor of transformational leadership includes a relatively large number of different components, with significant overlap between the components of the different leadership factors. In Yukl's view this raises questions about the 'construct validity' of the theory (Yukl, 1999: 288). This is linked to a lack of clarity on what constitutes exclusion and inclusion criteria. Why are certain elements included in the theory of transformational leadership and others not (Van Knippenberg and Sitkin, 2013: 11)?

Of interest to the argument developed in this article is the critique of what seems to be the heroic bias of transformational leadership. This bias can be observed on at least two levels. On one level, transformational leaders are described as the indispensable *explanans* for processes of change of followers' personal goals and their alignment with the more comprehensive and transformational vision of the leader. This vision is crafted, embodied and communicated by the transformational leader and '[combines followers] into a collective whole with a shared set of aspirations capable of guiding (or moulding) their everyday behaviour' (Tourish, 2013: 24). Most, if not all, transformational effects are thus described ultimately with reference to the intentions and behaviours of leaders (Yukl, 1999: 292). Influence is mostly understood as 'unidirectional', flowing from leaders to followers (Yukl, 1999: 292). Little to no attention is given

to the influence of group and organisational processes, and the impact these processes on the behaviour of leaders (Yukl, 1999: 287–288). This heroic bias is evidenced in what Tourish calls the ‘excessive leader agency’ implicit in transformational leadership theory (Tourish, 2013:20–39).

In an influential article Tourish and Pinnington (2002) outline some implications of the excessive focus on leadership agency in transformational leadership theory. Transformational leadership theory has no mechanism for handling dissent constructively, to a large extent because of the implied heroism of the transformational leader (2002: 152). In fact, the concomitant psychological processes lead to exaggerating the contribution that leaders make to change processes, overestimating the value of the qualities of the leaders, and producing a distorted self-image of the leaders themselves (often referred to as a ‘self-efficacy bias’) (Tourish and Pinnington, 2002: 153).

On a second level the heroic bias is also to be observed in the heroic terms in which the transformational leader is conceptualised. The theory of transformational leadership, even though in many respects an ‘ideal-type’ theory, does not make provision for the inevitable moral or ethical and technical failures of leaders. This perception has been strengthened in an article by Bass and Paul Steidlmeier on the morality of transformational leaders (Bass and Steidlmeier, 1999). They expound transformational leadership as a distinctly moral form of leadership. According to their argument, there is a fundamental distinction between authentic and inauthentic transformational leaders. Whereas the former type of leaders embodies a ‘moral foundation of legitimate values’ (Bass and Steidlmeier, 1999: 184), the latter perverts the transformational leadership factors for their own gain. Bass and Steidlmeier also refer to these inauthentic leaders as pseudo-transformational leaders. Pseudo-transformational leaders pervert idealised influence by, amongst other things, ‘[seeking] power and position even at the

expense of their followers' achievements' (Bass and Steidlmeier, 1999: 187), exploiting inspirational motivation to 'mislead, deceive and prevaricate' (Bass and Steidlmeier, 1999: 188), misusing intellectual stimulation to further 'a logic containing false assumptions to slay the dragons of uncertainty' (Bass and Steidlmeier, 1999: 188), and they may use individualised consideration to '[maintain] the dependence of their followers' (Bass and Steidlmeier, 1999: 189).

The heroic bias seems to exclude a wide range of different failures. When speaking of a range of 'failure' we apply a basic distinction between the uses of practical reason made by Jürgen Habermas (1991: 100–118) regarding the concept of 'failure'. Based on the reception of Habermas's distinction (see e.g. Reuter, 2015: 16) it seems plausible to distinguish three categories of failures (pragmatic, ethical, moral). In addition to these three, *legal failures* could be listed that refer to the violation of institutionalised laws and regulations.

Pragmatic failures refer to actions, programmes or decisions that turn out to be the wrong means towards achieving a previously determined end. Failure is measured in terms of functionality: does the leader's decision or action function towards reaching the appointed end? The opposite of a pragmatic failure is success. If, for example, a politician wants to fight poverty only by abolishing market control by state authorities and such a policy leads to even more poverty, his or her policy was a pragmatic failure.

Ethical failures refer to actions, programmes or decisions that fail to correspond to a personal or collective vision of the good life, to personal or collective identity and the customs relevant for that identity. Ethical failures are measured by the question: Is this the action of someone I or we want to be? The opposite of an ethical failure in this sense is authenticity. If the leader of a vegan association, for instance, is caught eating a curry sausage, this would probably be considered an ethical failure.

Moral failures refer to actions, programmes or decisions that fall short of corresponding to reasonable, discourse-based norms that should be valid for everybody; here the yardstick is the norms that everybody could potentially agree to without force.² The opposite of moral failure is doing the morally right and just thing. If, for example, a manager decides to increase his company's sales income by a fraudulent campaign, such a campaign would be a moral failure.

This distinction already highlights an important point: the perception of failure presupposes an evaluative framework that makes one see a failure as a failure in the first place. Such a framework itself is subject to critical, discursive examination. To be born outside a marriage was once considered to be a flaw in a person. The merely conventional framework that made this evaluation possible has been revised in many contexts – for good reasons. Evaluative frameworks will also be decisive when it comes to evaluating the purposes of a transformation process itself. While reflection on such frameworks is of great importance and closely interconnected with the focus of this paper, we will deal primarily with the possibility of leaders failing.

Transformational leadership theory seems to exclude the possibility that transformational leaders may be fallible – in pragmatic, ethical and moral senses. It seems to operationalise a binary logic in terms of which a person is either a true transformational leader, thus able to embody the transformational leadership factors, or a person is a pseudo-transformational leader, thus perverting the leadership factors. In addition, transformational leadership theory, at least as expounded by Bass and Avolio, seems to exclude the possibility that leaders may intentionally make mistakes outside the ambit of the four transformational leadership factors.

² For a more thorough elaboration of this see Habermas (1991: 113).

Jürgen Moltmann and the perversion of heroic leadership

The geographical and historical distance from the current transformational leadership discourse and theoretical location give the political theology of Jürgen Moltmann a novel perspective on the heroic bias of transformational leadership theory.

In order to interpret its key movements adequately one should take note of a number of contextual elements. At least one feature of the context for his work should be highlighted. He develops the core of his theory in the 1960s and 1970s – two decades of transformation. It is in this period that he wrote his first seminal work, *Theology of Hope*, in 1964 (Moltmann, 1967), and his second famous book, *The Crucified God*, in 1972 (Moltmann, 2015). Transformative change could be found on a number of fronts, notably in the societal renewal of post-war Germany, major developments in especially the Roman Catholic Church (as exemplified by the Second Vatican Council), the civil rights movement in the United States of America, socialism ‘with a human face’ in the Czechoslovakian Republic (ČSSR), major ecumenical advances and Willy Brandt’s vision of ‘risking more democracy’ in West Germany – transformation that soon included setbacks and disappointment (Moltmann, 1997: 26f; Müller-Fahrenholz, 2000: 32f, 51). These changes put on the agenda questions about how to understand such transformation, how fundamental these transformations would have to be, by what criteria they should be guided, or how to deal with frustration, disappointment and failure on the way. There are the questions, among others, that Moltmann addressed in his early work.

Leadership and personality cult

Moltmann’s broader political theological project provides the terminological means for a profound critique of personality cults. In his book the *Crucified God* and related works on

political theology this terminology is embedded in his critique of political religion, it's 'personal cults' (Moltmann, 2015: 210; Moltmann, 1970: 39) and – from a psychological perspective – of a 'religion of anxiety' (Moltmann, 2015: 436–439).

Moltmann develops the concept 'religion of anxiety' in dialogue with Sigmund Freud and Erich Fromm. It refers to the 'idols' people create to suppress their anxiety about guilt and freedom (Moltmann, 2015: 435f.):

Where the anxiety of guilt is suppressed [...] and where men flee to rituals and idols in order to be rid of the burden of grief, the result is apathy, insensitivity, the fixation of life in obsessional repetitions. (Moltmann, 2015: 435)

People then 'expect eternal support from things which offer no support' (Moltmann, 2015: 436). People become dependent on their idols, which seems to imply an aggressive demonisation of all that is perceived as possibly dangerous for the idol (Moltmann, 2015: 437f.): That is why the cult around such idols leads to hostility against everything foreign (Moltmann, 2015: 438). Idols are, for example, the 'fatherland, race, class, profit, consumption or anti-social attitudes' (Moltmann, 2015: 437). One can add 'idolized persons' to this list. Moltmann links these idols somehow to a certain kind of heroic strength:

The pattern formations of repression and the idols and laws of the religion of anxiety may not either suffer or die, since they have been erected against suffering and dying. (Moltmann, 2015: 438)

One could add that they must not show the weakness of failing. They must not be weak, but eternal and powerful (2015: 439) in order to function as means against instability, anxiety at freedom and change.

The concept 'religion of anxiety' and the formation of idols is relevant to leadership theories insofar as they highlight a possible dynamic between leaders and followers: Where a leader initiates change and successfully alters the goals of his or her followers, these followers can all too easily come to expect clear guidance and strong leadership that relieves the followers themselves of all the inconveniences of freedom and responsibility, the fear of being guilty, and unpleasant instability. Following the theoretical concept, such a dynamic will be more likely in as much as the failures and fallibility of the leader are made invisible – by the followers, by the leader him- or herself, or by a third person, intentionally or unintentionally. One could easily exemplify such a dynamic for different kinds of groups – from religious communities with saviour-like charismatic priests to political parties with autocratic leaders.

Parallel to this 'religion of anxiety' that needs untouchable idols and renders people apathetic is what Moltmann (2015: 477) calls 'political idolatry': According to Moltmann, political idolatry becomes visible when political leaders are seen as superior to the people they represent (477). This again causes people become apathetic and passive (477f). The felt difference between those 'up there' and the apathetic mass 'down here' inevitably grows (477f). Representation then turns into domination, functional authority into positional authority (Moltmann, 1970: 43). Elsewhere, Moltmann explicitly names the personality cult in one breath with idolatries and superstition (Moltmann, 1970: 39).

This notion developed by Moltmann interestingly seems to point to what one can call the 'failure of infallibility'. Leaders become prone to function as idols of personality cult (in terms of a 'religion of anxiety' or 'political idolatry') especially insofar as they are perceived to be faultless, immaculate, superior and consequently stable, inviolable and free from suffering. All these attributions enlarge the felt difference between the seemingly faultless leader and the fallible

mass, which also makes it less likely that the followers will see themselves as being in a position to criticise their leader.

Moltmann juxtaposes political religion and the resultant personality cults with a 'theology of the cross'. It is this thoroughly theological proposal that contains figures of thought that deepen the theological critique of political religion and personality cults. However, in order to appreciate and use these figures of thought we need to take note of the core theological movement of his argument. Moltmann narrates the story of Jesus Christ's suffering, crucifixion and resurrection as characterisation of God (Moltmann, 2015: 281, 365). According to this narrative, God can also be viewed as crucified, as vulnerable and as humiliating himself (Moltmann, 2015: 438f). The one who is believed to be the Son of God is not the one who rules from above and gives power to those in power. Rather, he is the one who is crucified in the name of political religion – the outcast (Moltmann, 2015: 476–478). This gives the believer theological reasons to criticise and to be liberated from all political idolatries and 'religions of fear' that imply the superiority and invulnerability of their god and idols, and that render people apathetic and exclude them from active participation.

Accordingly, if this core narrative of Christianity is recounted in this way, it challenges concepts of human leadership devoid of weakness and fallibility. Moltmann writes about the "crucified God":

In becoming weak, impotent, vulnerable and mortal, he frees man from the quest for powerful idols and protective compulsion and makes him ready to accept his humanity, his freedom and his mortality. (Moltmann 2015: 439)

Based on this theological movement one can criticise personality cults and analogous heroic concepts of leadership in at least three ways. Firstly, as Moltmann puts it, authority and

leadership 'can only be justified from "below"' and not as divinely legitimised, for example (Moltmann, 2015: 478). This 'legitimation from below' can be understood in two senses, one concerning the effects of leadership, the other possibilities for participation: the legitimacy of leadership depends on the positive transformation towards more freedom and justice that it makes possible for the outcast and those least fortunate. The legitimacy also depends on how far the decision-making and transformation process includes those least fortunate and promotes their participation.

Secondly, Moltmann's a critique of political religion makes it necessary to integrate the leader's weakness – and, one could add, failures – into a concept of leadership. Such a concept may not work with faultless, perfect idols as leaders. Rather, their weaknesses and failures have to be part of a concept of leadership. Concepts of leadership oblivious to the fallibility of the leader are in danger of turning into manifestations of a cult of people who can only envision impeccable superhumans as leaders. This would deepen the (felt) difference between the seemingly superior leader and the normal fallible rest of humanity, which makes the rest all the more apathetic and excludes them from participation. On the other hand, seeing leaders as fallible humans protects them and their followers against idolisation and against being singled out as superhuman over against the normal rest of humankind. To see them as fallible also makes it at least harder if not impossible for the followers to deny their share in the responsibility for the transformation process.

Thirdly, the ideas summarized here and especially the concept of 'religion of anxiety' point to the function that the heroic bias fulfils practically for the followers: idolising leaders can be a strategy to cope with the fear of freedom, of guilt and of existential insecurity. This broadens the scope of the critique: not only is the conceptualisation of a faultless leader problematic, but also – and sometimes in the first place – the group's expectation of a leader to be faultless.

Leadership and transformation

Moltmann's critique of political religion and idols is placed within the broader framework of his 'eschatology', his thinking about the future transformation of reality. He typifies this future transformation of reality with the concept of 'hope', as expressed also in the title of his book *Theology of Hope* (Moltmann, 1967: 16; Bauckham, 1995: 8–10).

In developing this eschatology, he emphasises two elements of this future transformation of reality.³ Firstly, in contrast to any purely present eschatology he emphasises the 'not yet' character of the present: the ultimate reality of life, righteousness and freedom are still to come and are qualitatively different from the present world (Moltmann, 1967: 33, 103, 203–229). Secondly, this future world is not another world, but *this* world qualitatively changed and newly created (Bauckham, 1995: 35, 38). By hoping, one 'sees in the resurrection of Christ not the eternity of heaven, but the future of the very earth on which his cross stands' (Moltmann, 1967: 21; Bauckham, 1995: 35; Harvie, 2009: 23). Such a hope provides a framework – or as Moltmann has put it 'a horizon' (Moltmann, 1967: 106) – for perception of, and meaningful action in, the contemporary world (cf. Moltmann, 1967: 326f.; Moltmann, 1971a). On the one hand, the failures of present realities inevitably become visible in this framework, or – as Moltmann puts it poetically:

[F]or the goad of the promised future stabs inexorably into the flesh of every unfulfilled present. If we had before our eyes only what we see, then we should cheerfully or reluctantly reconcile ourselves with things as they happen to be.
(Moltmann, 1967: 21f.)

³ For the description of these two elements, similar concepts, and the following summaries see also Bauckham (1995: 33–35), Chester (2006: 87), Harvie (2009: 23–30) and Höhne (2015: 49–54).

The promise of peace makes present conflicts all the more visible, strips them of their otherwise self-evident normality. Moltmann draws anthropological consequences from this thought, insofar as he places the anthropological question on the horizon of a promised future. The question 'who or what is man?', according to Moltmann, 'arises in the face of a divine mission, charge and appointment which transcend the bounds of the humanly possible' (Moltmann, 1967: 285).

On the other hand, this framework makes the world and human life appear as subject to change, and thus as part of a dynamic process. Moltmann describes this 'new understanding of the world' as follows: 'This world is not the heaven of self-realization, as it was said to be in idealism. This world is not the hell of self-estrangement, as it is said to be in romanticist and existentialist writing. The world is not yet finished, but is understood as engaged in a history' (Moltmann, 1967: 338). Thus, the horizon of hope includes seeing the world as historical and transformable (Moltmann, 1967: 288; Bauckham, 1995: 10). This corresponds to the emphasis in transformational leadership on the transformation of followers. But if the whole world is historical, the leader will also be included in that very historicity herself or himself.

Seeing leadership as 'historical' in this sense allows for a differentiated perspective on failures. First of all, this framework makes all shortcomings and present problems all the more visible, be it those occurring in a given community or those embodied by a certain leader. To downplay or even hide these failures would mean to downplay and hide the difference between present reality and the future hoped for. But – secondly – in a world not yet finished, those failures can be seen as part of a changing world rather than as ultimate reality. At least for pragmatic and ethical failures, even the standard that makes the failure a failure can be seen as subject to change. The previously fixed aims are not that fixed – neither are customs and collective identities.

This view is at odds with nailing people down to their past wrongdoing or their past heroic deeds (Moltmann, 1971b: 29). Both will have to be seen as part of their past, present and future story, and consequently precisely as parts rather than as the whole. In such a perspective, even the wrongdoer will appear in the light of who she or he could become. To put it in Moltmann's terminology: a person in a leadership position is to be understood neither as pure saint nor as a demon, but as a person with a story and in a history. Thus, this allows us to question a concept of leadership that distinguishes only the morally good and bad leader. It makes it necessary to see the stages and shades between these two opposite poles.

This perspective avoids certain theoretical problems, but is jeopardised by others. It avoids the need to justify or excuse failures by seeing them as part of universal and unchangeable human reality, the universality of sin, for instance. Seen in light of the envisioned future, they are visible for what they are: failures. On the other hand, the actual failures of leading persons can possibly be seen more generously when they are seen as part of a story rather than as a determination of a whole person. Of course, such a generosity must imply seeing the failures of followers at least equally generously.

Nevertheless, the framework is in danger of being misunderstood as another version of an uncritical belief in progress. In other publications, Moltmann has more thoroughly distinguished between two understandings of the future that correspond to two different attitudes to that future (Moltmann, 1971c: 178–182, 194; Moltmann, 1974: 73f; Müller-Fahrenholz, 2000: 46f.). *Futur* refers to the future that evolves out of present possibilities. It is subject to human planning and statistical forecasts, which make inferences from present to future realities. In contrast to that, *Adventus* describes a future that is qualitatively new, in which what is not yet possible becomes possible, that is beyond one's control, present possibilities and planning. It is the coming future that can only be hoped for. Moltmann (1971c: 193f.) distinguishes these two without separating

them; rather, he sees them in a dialectical relationship. This notion challenges all uncritical beliefs in progress, because it sees the decisive strand in history as beyond one's control.

Towards fallible transformational leaders?

Transformational leadership theory seeks to provide clarity on the type of leaders who drive processes of transformational change, and emphasises the importance of uniting on higher shared goals and realising them. Some leadership theorists argue that transformational leadership theory runs the risk of overemphasising the agency of the leader and promoting a heroic leadership bias. In interrogating this perceived weakness further, we juxtaposed the core tenets of transformational leadership theory with theory that is geographically, historically and ideologically removed, namely the theology of Jürgen Moltmann that makes a critique of the 'personality cult' possible and necessary.

According to our analysis, Moltmann's work provides impulses for integrating the inevitability of human failure into concepts of leadership that emphasise the role of an individual leader in processes of change. In our view, the use of Moltmann's theory lies in its radicalisation of two elements of processes of transformation.

Moltmann, on the one hand, radicalises *the nature of the transformation* implied by transformational leadership. By distinguishing between two types of futures, namely the *Futur* and *Adventus*, he contends that transformation is more than a technical process, with the requisite leadership factors. Transformation does not only evolve from the possibilities of the present, but should also be seen as something that can be qualitatively different from the present. By relying on both historical examples and theological resources, Moltmann radicalises transformation as something that always, to some extent, lies beyond the control of any leader

or follower. Building on this, Moltmann also adds a rather realistic note to the notion of transformation. Even the envisioned future should be expected to require further changes and transformation. The human transformation is certainly not, in Moltmann's view, realising utopia.

Moltmann also, on the other hand, radicalises *the scope of the transformational process*, and by doing so he diverges significantly from the heroic bias implicit in existing transformational leadership theory. Drawing inferences from Moltmann's thought, it is plausible to argue that the transformational leader herself or himself should not be viewed simply as the agent of change, but as part of the change. The transformational leader is also in need of transformation. Then one can integrate the leader's failures into a concept of transformative leadership insofar as these failures can be seen as part of longer, dynamic story and as part of a person's narrative rather than as the whole story or person. This argumentation includes a framework to integrate the failure, because this argumentation denies the ultimate character of a given failure and makes it subject to change. The framework includes a criterion because it excludes failures that betray the promised future so deeply that their doer can no longer function as an inspiring transformative leader on the horizon of this promised future. The 'transformation' in transformational leadership can therefore be conceived of as including the transformation of the leader, and not only of followers and elements in the environment.

At least three reasons can be given for this contention.

In a more polemical fashion: it is *dangerous* not to see the transformational leader as in need of transformation. Allowing transformational leadership to give birth to a personality cult, or certainly to exclude the person of the transformational leader from the transformation process, runs the risk of feeding followers' 'fear of freedom'. It creates a false sense of security in complex circumstances, and runs the risk of disabling followers' agency.

The inability or unwillingness of transformational leadership theory to include the shortcomings of the leader is, in terms of Moltmann's work, *non-sense*. All people are fallible and prone to experiencing and causing suffering. Put differently: a leader is also a person with a history, with weaknesses and blind spots, and will certainly make mistakes. Following Moltmann's theology, this need not be seen as reason to despair and discontinue our hope for transformation. This should much rather be seen as the basis for developing a more humane conception of both leaders and followers. On a conceptual level Moltmann makes one dispute the assumption that only infallible leaders can drive processes of transformational change.

It is possible to infer that fallible leaders, should the fallibility be handled constructively, are in fact *necessary* for processes of transformational change. This creates the possibility for legitimating leadership from below, and thus requiring the agency of followers even in the leaders' own transformation process. This does not mean, however, that Moltmann makes one condone failure, or even promote it. Failures, and the condition of fallibility, should be acknowledged as both inevitable and destructive, yet capable of providing the impetus for more humane and constructive behaviours. His work also provides a horizon on which acceptable and unacceptable failures can be distinguished.

Pragmatic failures are inevitable, because human knowledge – not least knowledge about the future – is limited and always less complex than reality. But seen as part of a process of transformation, pragmatic failures can be dealt with constructively: as impulses for learning how to do it better. As long as concepts of leadership make those failures invisible and thereby force leaders to make their pragmatic failures invisible, they disenable such learning processes.

Ethical failures should then be seen in the context of transformations which include the leaders as well as the common identity and customs that makes those failures appear as failures.

Ethical failures can be hugely destructive, but they can also function constructively as an impulse to rethink one's customs or identity.

Moral failures will not be downplayed by being seen on the horizon of future transformation. Their destructiveness will become all the more obvious. But they can be seen as the ongoing story of a transformational leader as long as they don't betray the promised future so deeply that those guilty of such failures can no longer function as inspiring transformative leaders. At least, they always remind followers of their own remaining share in the responsibility for the transformational process.

Concluding remarks

Impulses from Moltmann's work powerfully dispel the fear that transformational change is impossible if transformational leaders are fallible and make mistakes. Based on his work it could be argued that it is fallible leaders who can contribute to a more humane, transformed, future. But is it possible to rehabilitate transformational leadership theory by integrating the critique developed in this article?

According to our reading of the literature, a heroic bias lies at the core of transformational leadership theory. This bias runs the risk of fostering quasi-religious cults of personality, with disempowering effects on the followers. Transformational leadership theory also seems to depend on a concept of transformation that over-emphasises the agency of the leader. Addressing these weaknesses will, at best, require significant conceptual changes to existing theory. At worst, these weaknesses are embedded in the core of transformational leadership theory, and not available for correction.

In our view, leadership theories that seek to emphasise the connection between individual leaders and processes of transformation would do well to include an understanding of transformation in which the leader is a participant in the transformational process. This implies acceptance non-controllable elements in the process. It also alters the perspective on failures and leads to a differentiated integration of failures into the concept of leadership. In fact, it accepts the inevitability of human failures as part of the transformation process. Such failures can be integrated insofar as they do not betray the goals of the process substantially. This would not only make the concept and image of leadership more humane. It can hopefully also help to attract humanely acting people to positions of leadership.

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