Dictators, Autocrats, and the Abuse of Religion

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Throughout history, leaders have claimed to either be gods, relatives of gods, appointed by gods, or confidants of gods. While religion plays a crucial role in ethics, it can also adversely affect leadership. The revelation, discovery, or invention of gods and their stories go hand-in-hand with the evolution of humans, society, and the status and power of leaders. This paper takes a historical look at the relationship between religion and dictators and shows what happens when the two systems overlap. Then it applies those observations to the growing number of autocrats today.[1] I do not aim to disparage or disrespect religion. Instead, I explore how secular and religious leaders abuse it.[2] Leaders abuse religion when they use it to obtain power and for their goals. By understanding when and how leaders abuse religion, we can better spot and combat the rise of autocrats and protect the dignity and moral core of all faiths.

Gods are the leaders of human leaders. Belief in them created a new paradigm of a leader that may or may not have infiltrated people's implicit notions of leadership. The causal direction is unclear. Did the concept of gods change ideas about leaders, or did internalized concepts of leaders shape our images of gods? The descriptions of gods spring from human imagination and depict ideal leaders who are powerful and care for us. Sigmund Freud thought that the persona of God came from how infants regard their parents. If Freud is right, maybe dictatorship is our default setting for leaders. Perhaps without guardrails and vigilant followers, societies and organizations

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[1], Unlike dictators who simply take power, autocrats consolidate their power by co-opting existing institutions such as the courts.
[2] I use the word gods generically to include monotheistic and polytheistic entities.

drift towards autocratic leaders. This would partly explain the willingness of people to support aspiring authoritarians today.

In most religions, gods are everywhere, all-knowing and all-powerful entities. The gods' leadership style is dictatorial but usually moral and benevolent. Followers praise gods, follow their commands without question, and are rewarded or punished accordingly. Dictators aspire to be like gods. They long for the gods' faithful, unquestioning, obedient followers but not their moral commitments.

Leaders have used religion to legitimize their rule and make leading easier. Usually, religious leaders and secular leaders work together in parallel domains. Yet, some secular leaders envy the power of religion over them. Similarly, some religious leaders resent the influence of secular leaders (and their values) on society. The paper argues that when religious leaders try to take over the temporal realm or secular leaders try to co-opt religion, problems ensue. Both takeovers are usually by autocrats and would-be dictators, resulting in violence or violation of people's autonomy or rights. Dictators are okay in the spiritual world but are usually disasters in the secular one.

Secular and religious dictators have a love-hate relationship with each other. Joseph Stalin brutally crushed religion in the Soviet Union. Mao Zedong stamped out religion in China. Dictatorial religious leaders also attempt to overthrow or suppress governments that challenge their moral perspective. Fundamentalist groups like the Taliban in Afghanistan or the Ayatollahs in Iran want a religious state unchallenged by their secular leaders.

Some secular and religious leaders resolve the tension by staying close to each other. This strategy is popular with autocratic heads of state in democratic countries, such as Israel and Turkey. They use religion as an ally to erode the power of the courts to restrict the rights of women and

minority groups, and other religious groups. India's Prime Minister Narendra Modi has embraced Hindu nationalism while taking other authoritarian measures such as limiting freedom of the press. In the US, leaders in politics and business use religion to justify changing laws and fueling prejudice against those with the wrong faith, color, sexual orientation, or ethnic background. Vladimir Putin realized that rather than trying to beat religion, reviving and becoming a savior and friend to the Russian Orthodox Church would make him stronger.

Dictators and autocrats like religion because it is a potent source of identity. Most religions tell their believers they are special. Their beliefs are superior because their gods or interpretation of the gods' teachings are the only truth. Immigration, fueled by conflict, crime, religious persecution, climate change, and other social and economic factors, has set the stage for today's aspiring autocrats. And, as always, religion provides them with the passion and cloak of morality that has fueled and justified history's seemingly endless series of religious wars, persecutions, and culture wars for centuries. Leaders in the secular and spiritual realms oversee two different systems of beliefs and behaviors. They work well together but can result in disaster when a leader in one domain usurps both.

Beyond sacrifice:
A relational, affective perspective on love in leadership

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> …the very notion of love as developed in Western thought presupposes that something is loved, while someone else, as subject, does the loving. Even if the possibility of a reciprocal love is acknowledged, and the one who is loved is also understood to love, the notion of love itself circulates around a subject/object dichotomy that presumes specific patterns of relating governing the exchange between sameness and difference, self and other. (Renshaw, 2009: 22)

Love is suggested to be a defining feature of leadership (Daft 2016). Its significance is acknowledged in analyses of paternalistic leadership (Michael-Tsabari, Barbera, and Henssen 2022), humanistic leadership (Lee 2022), servant leadership (van Direndonck and Patterson 2015), spiritual leadership (Fry 2003) and follower/leader relations (Markow 2022). Scholars have pointed towards the importance of love in the context of education (Wilkinson and Kaukko 2020) and healthcare (Shingler-Nace 2020), as well as to leadership generally. Love is regarded as central to the development of ethical leadership, providing both the motivation to lead, and a basis for compassionate relationships between leaders and followers (Kouzes and Posner 1992). It also features in analyses of charismatic leadership where it is suggested to play a role in the construction of follower identity narratives (Kempster and Parry 2014).

This paper will show how dominant conceptions of love in leadership are closely tied to religion through being based on a Christian tradition of agape (Nygren 1982 [1932]), a spiritual love that is characterised by unconditionality, altruism, selflessness and sacrifice (Kierkegaard 2009 [1847]). Agape casts the leader as unconditionally and selflessly responsible for the needs and lives of followers. However, feminist theologians argue that such unconditionality makes agape a disembodied love which denies particularity and humanity (Andolsen 1981; Heyward 1982). They further argue that agape's self-sacrificial ideal is distinctly gendered, historically calling upon women to sacrifice themselves and their needs in order to embody love for others.

The paper draws on these feminist critiques, using them to explore how leadership studies reproduces a sovereign, patriarchal vision of love that casts the leader as saviour. We show how this results in a demand for passive, feminised followership which is characterised by sacrificial love. Through agapeic love's insistence on blindness to the particulars of the loved object, these subject-object distinctions preclude the possibility of intersubjective relations founded on our differences and particularity. We present instead a relational view of love as something that 'emerges in the in-between' (Renshaw 2009, p. 6). Drawing on the work of Cixous (1991) and Renshaw (2009) we consider how love may be reimagined 'not as something an 'I' does or has, but rather as something that happens to an us, that emerges, in the very space of meeting' (Renshaw, 2009: 6). This gives rise to a way of thinking about love as emplaced in acts of generosity that structure 'social relations where self and other are not constituted as opposing categories that meet over the ashes of negated difference' (Renshaw 2009: 15).

We show how this way of thinking links to and builds upon a relational view of leadership that is founded on a process ontology (Crevani, Lindgren and Packendorff 2010). It positions love as a force that emerges and exists between entities, rather than as an emotion located within the self or bestowed

upon the other. Love is thereby understood as a productive, affective-material force that is 'capable of transforming bodies, social formations and ideas' (Fox and Alldred 2017: 101), providing a basis for collective political agency which is fundamental to the constitution of the commons (Hennessy 2014). By moving away from individualistic and sacrificial conceptions of love and transcending leader- and follower-centred approaches, we suggest it becomes possible to reclaim the love of leadership and to engage with its heterogeneous and vital possibilities.

[622 words]

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Re-Imagining Self-Leadership

Charles Manz (1986), while researching the influence that organizational members exert over themselves, coined the term self-leadership to distinguish it from "self-management that facilitates behaviors that are not naturally motivating and that meet externally anchored standards (585)." Self-management is about employees self-disciplining themselves to meet an organization's performance standards and emphasizes motivating rewards separate from the task in which the employee is engaged.

Self-leadership expands on self-management to emphasize leadership of self towards personally chosen standards and the natural rewards of engaging in a task, complimenting the ways employee-driven task performance can be improved by self-managing strategies that accomplish required but not naturally motivating work. The concept was conceived as a substitute for traditional organizational leadership aimed at improving organizational performance (DiLiello & Houghton, 2006).

Self-leadership has been associated with improvement of job performance of individuals, teams, and organizations (Neck and Houghton, 2006). Self-leadership has subsequently been described as a process of influencing (Neck & Manz, 1992; Neck, et. al., 2017) and leading oneself by employing sets of behavioral, cognitive (Neck, & Houghton, 2006), and emotional strategies (Manz, Houghton, Neck, Fugate, & Pearce, 2016) to develop the self-motivation and self-direction to perform more effectively in the workplace to achieve performance standards

(Stewart et al., 2011). They include self-observation, self-management of cues, self-goal setting, self-reward, self-criticism, and rehearsal (Stewart, Courtright, & Manz, 2011). It is viewed as a normative process (Du Plessis, 2019) that is the basis for becoming an effective leader (Neck, et. al., 2017). The concept of self-leadership was expanded to address self-leading teams (Stewart, Courtright, & Manz, 2011).

Recently, some scholars have begun to reimagine self-leadership. For example, Pina e Cunha, Pacheo, Castanheira, & Rego (2017) had defined self-leadership as "the process of leading others with a high degree of reflexivity" (473) that allows leaders to handle and sustain four dualities: challenge and routine; self and other; nonwork and work; mind and body. Du Plessis, M. (2019) developed a positive self-leadership development framework that optimizes character strengths, interest and aspirations, abilities and talents, and environmental strengths. She defines positive self-leadership as "the capacity to identify and apply one's signature strengths to initiate, maintain, or sustain self-influence behaviours (450)."

What remains conspicuously absent from the self-leadership literature is an articulation of human nature and a definition of the self, and, thus, their implications for conceiving self-leadership and facilitating its practice. Human nature and a definition of the self cannot be assumed, as literature is vast and consists of alternative conceptualizations (Baumeister, 2022).

In this essay, I extend the concept of self-leadership that transcends its organizational context, focus on improving employee performance, and treatment of people as a resource. I begin by articulating a view of humans as biosocial becomings (Ingold & Palsson, 2013) and, consistent with this view, Roy Baumeister's (2022) explanation of the self not as thing but as system, process or performance that exists at the interface of the body and society and identify its key aspects, functions, and abilities.

"(W)e find ourselves *situated* in a world that is not of our making, and this "situatedness" is fundamental to what a human being is (Crawford, 26). Our self comes into being in situations not of our own making. Our environment constitutes us, as we are not free to do whatever we want but are constrained and afforded opportunities by the circumstances we find ourselves within. Our selves are developed within our ongoing situational constrained actions (Crawford, 2015)

"The self is not a thing. It is better to think of the self as a system, a process, or a performance. A system connects multiple pieces or parts into coordinated functioning. A process is a set of changes that are causally linked across time, one leading to the next. In a performance, an entity acts in a meaningful way as part of a group. In contrast, a thing is generally that same across time. Human selves are always in flux, dealing with new situations, learning, adapting, and they operate as organized systems (Baumeister, 2022, 4)." "[Y]our self is a flux of interactions and relationships, and your feeling of your self is created in that same flux (Lowery, 2023, 30).

"In the relational viewpoint the individual begins life as an effect produced by the many others in the world of his immediate past. But he is not simply a function of these relations. He is an emergent from his relationships, and in the process of his emergence he also creates himself. His life as a living individual consists of synthesizing into some degree of subjective unity the various relational causes or influences which have initiated his process of becoming something definite. His concrete life is constituted by a process of deciding what he will make out of what he has received. This is his emergent selfhood. What he makes out of what he has received is who he is. This is also his emergent freedom because he is his decision. His subjective life is his process of deciding who he is (Bernard Loomer, 1976, 20)."

Based on this view of human nature and the self and understanding leadership as the process of influencing a system to achieve its goals to fulfill its purpose, I offer an alternative conceptualization of self-leadership as an embodied, situated, and relational practice directed towards consciously living a life of significance, as well as identify self-leadership practices and human challenges to self-leadership.

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Title:
Leadership, ethics, and the systemic nature of sustainability: a review

In this paper we explore new and emerging understandings of leadership in the context of sustainability transformations. Since the earlier literature on environmental leadership (Portugal and Yukl 1994), the research has proliferated to also address wider planetary and social ecological issues, involving leadership of complex systems change in sustainability transitions (Uhl-Bien 2021; Williams et al. 2017; Markard, Raven & Truffer 2012; Loorbach 2010). This literature suggests an evolution in leadership ability (Metcalf & Benn 2013), and a new systemic ethical leadership responsiveness (Painter-Morland 2008). Subsequently, the need for a revision of management theory has been discussed (Foss et al. 2022).

With the development in leadership theory to also address the systemic nature of sustainability, follows a tension between leadership theory's traditional reliance on human agency as the given epicenter of attention and the inclusion of an ontology of systems-thinking. This tension has similarities with the structure-agency theme in sociological theory (Giddens 1984; Bourdieu 1980), the system vs. lifeworld dichotomy (Habermas 1985), as well as tensions found in original and recent debates on structural injustice (Marx 2004; Young 2006). Later attempts to overcome this dualism are also found in social theory (Luhmann 1995; Latour 2012), and looking to the research field of social ecology, the 'system' here includes interdependent natural and social systems (Harberl et al. 2011).

We use the agent-structure theme in social theory as a general framework for reviewing the literature on leadership for sustainability and systemic change.

For this purpose, we engage with Lisa Herzogs *Reclaiming the System* (2018), where individual members of organizations should perform 'transformational agency' when they act on and reform organizational systems. Members of organizations cannot be reduced to passive 'cogs in the wheel' of the organizational bureaucratic system, but should stand up for moral decency, and actively reclaim the organizational system and take responsibility for its wider institutional role in society.

Herzog refers to Hirschman's exit, voice, and loyalty strategies, when suggesting that transformational agency is exemplifying 'voice' in combination with critical 'loyalty'. The 'exit' option is considered a negative resignation from responsibility and should be avoided when possible. Thus, transformational agency is a model of responding to systemic problems of the organization and the society to which it belongs.

We suggest exposing Herzog's moderately optimistic theory of organizational ethics to current theory developments around leadership and systemic issues of sustainability (Boeske 2023; Case et al. 2015). Our suggestion is that this strand of literature could beneficially be reviewed distinguishing two basic approaches: a *reformist* (*pace* Herzog) and a *radical* (or revolutionary) approach to leadership (cf. MacGregor Burns 1978). We link these stances to sustainability by adopting Dryzeks (2021) typology of sustainability discourses. By radical we do not mean 'excessive', but in a world of transgressed planetary boundaries and environmental tipping-points, reformists and radicals diverge on how to lead the sustainable transformation (Whiteman, Walker & Perego 2013).

In the reformist camp one finds incrementalistic leadership (cf. Lindblom 1979) framings of sustainability that focus on internal organizational problem-solving and innovation (Hahn et al. 2015). Also, leadership for sustainable development (Biermann et al. 2017) can be considered reformist considering the broadly liberal and managerial understanding of SDG-management.

The radical or revolutionary camp will, however, see the reformists as being uncritical supporters of the current unjust and unsustainable system (Fotaki & Foroughi 2022). The awareness of the deeply entrenched systemic properties of unsustainable institutions and structures is key to the radical understanding of sustainability. Furthermore, they often favor degrowth (Fitzpatrick et al. 2022) and are fierce critics of anthropocentrism (Næss 1973). However, reformists could also commit to such views, but according to Dryzek (2021) they seldom do.

In a systematic literature review screening the research literature on sustainable leadership from 2018-2022 (in continuation of Hallinger & Suriyankietkaew (2018)), we apply the reformist vs radical distinction, and the finding is a vast majority of publications committed to a reformist approach.

This finding led us to further explore selected higher-ranking journals in leadership, management, and governance to review contributions with both a reformist and a radical orientation to leadership and systemic problems.

Based on social theory and the learnings from the reviews, we discuss possible answers to what kind of leadership is represented in the literature with a view to systemic change and sustainable transformations.

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