

'Quo vadis' idol leaders? A critique of leadership praxes in South Africa

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'Quo vadis' destructive idol leaders in South Africa? Different theories of leadership are critiqued with interlocutors on why and how the idolisation of authentic and destructive leaders is plausible. Contemporary and historical leadership practices are presented. A theoretical framework outlines various leadership theories. To this end, the role of power and authority of leaders is presented. Destructive leadership and susceptible followers are discussed, followed by a focus on idol leaders, and concluded with a theological critique.

Contribution: A theological critique informs a reversal of power and authority resonating with the servanthood model of Christ. The root cause of idolising destructive leaders points to the aggrandising of the abuse of power and authority for self-serving reasons, undergirded by susceptible followers and conducive environments.

Keywords: idol leaders; idolisation of leaders; destructive leadership; authentic leaders; servanthood leadership; South Africa.

Introduction

Archbishop Desmond Tutu has said that his experience of South Africa taught him two contradictory things. On the one hand, we have an extraordinary capacity for good. But on the other hand, 'Yes, we human beings have a remarkable capacity for evil—we have refined ways of being mean and nasty to one another. There have been genocides, holocausts, slavery, racism, wars, oppression, and injustice' (Tutu 2000:638). Because leadership makes a difference, sometimes even a big difference, those of us who desire to make the world a better place must do what Tutu did. We must come to grips with leadership as two contradictory things: good and bad (Kellerman 2004:14).

My disposition during the last two decades was to de-emphasise conventional theoretical theories of leadership. My rationale was that conventional theories of leadership or prescribed models of leaders are a mechanical exercise to alleviate the profiles of a particular tribe of leaders across the globe for privilege, power and wealth. I recently discovered that I am not the only sceptic (cf. Shamir & Eilam-Shamir 2017). Thus, my response during the last two decades was to craft a practical theology of leadership, based on existential challenges more than on conventional leadership theories or methodologies. Political activism pre-1994, and my research engagements with leaders on almost all the stratifications of society in South Africa, sensitised me to prioritise the existential living realities of suffering and disadvantaged citizens. The context was my respective roles as a manager of the Partnership of Missional Churches in Southern Africa and senior researcher at the Ethical Leadership Project at the University of Stellenbosch and the Peninsula University of Technology in Bellville, Cape Town. However, the probability of being naïve is plausible if your senses are awakened to the fact that there must be more good than evil in this world. My resolve is, at least in the context of this article, to follow scientific convention to problematise the theory of the *idolisation of bad and/or good leaders*. It is implausible to consider an uncritical conception of the *idolisation of leadership* in the current South African context. Pervasive toxic and destructive practices of leadership failures in South Africa inflicted a morally injurious disposition in my philosophical and theoretical conception of leaders on all strata of society.

Idolisation of leadership, for instance, encapsulates a juxtaposition of harmful and/or good consequences. South Africans are blessed with good, authentic leaders who excelled as role models. However, the existential living reality in post-apartheid South Africa could be viewed as a morally injurious experience inflicted by leadership failures (Dames 2025; cf. Boesak 2009; Esau 2023; Isaacs 2010; Present 2022; Pedro 2024). Some of the former prominent leaders were exemplary role models. However, many others have succumbed to the allure and aggrandising of power,

wealth and sexual misconduct. This created a conducive environment for bad leadership practices – guilty of immoral and unethical conduct. This article aims to raise awareness of and invite scholars to redress the danger of idolising bad leaders who inflict pervasive and destructive harm on society and institutions. Our quest is to gain a better understanding of how perceptions of destructive or bad leaders are created.

I will critique the rationale of the idolisation of good or bad leaders by drawing on historical and contemporary perspectives of power-abusive leadership praxes, followed by a theoretical framework appropriating multidisciplinary leadership theories. The next step is to present leadership theories of power and authority. Malevolent aspects of leadership, such as the abuse of power and authority, will be explored. Furthermore, I will focus on the notion of pervasive and destructive idolised leaders. Finally, a theological critique of leadership will conclude the discussion. In this article, I present an illustration of a continuum of leadership. On the one hand, leadership is based on external values, resources, innovation and intentions; on the other hand, leadership is based on transcendental, intrinsic values of eternal, divine goals.

The aim of this article is to seek answers to the question: *Where are we heading with our assumptions of and distortions of destructive idolised leaders in South Africa?* To do so, we will need to recount some of the past and current practices of leaders.

Contemporary and historical perspectives of leadership

Hence, the *quo vadis* question can be answered in various ways in the light of examples of questionable leadership behaviour and actions. From where are we coming and where are we heading with destructive and bad leaders? I hold that South Africa is an oppressed and depressed land in need of a new spirit and moral soul for fundamental renewal. The rationale refers to the fact that too many leaders and their followers in the land harbour harmful and distorted assumptions or worldviews for self-serving purposes. There is a vacuum of compassionate and accountable leaders in our country (Boesak 2009). Consider the headlines of the *Mail and Guardian* (2025): ‘That’s a red card!; Harassment: Mbenenge’s “persuasive” defense; An overdose of ARVs in our rivers; Mchunu row: Pressure piles up on Cyril to take action’. Consider governance and transactional red flags at the South African Football Association; a tribunal determining whether Eastern Cape judge president Selby Mbenenge is guilty of sexual harassment of a former court secretary, Andiswa Mengo; allegations against the Police Minister, Senzo Mchunu, of shutting down a specialised unit to investigate political and entertainment-related killings in KwaZulu-Natal; and the findings of a study that pollutants such as lopinavir and efavirenz in our rivers are because of mismanagement of wastewater treatment plants (Bega 2025:8; Comins 2025:4; Mabasa 2025:3; Nyathi 2025:5). When a sitting judge president argues in his defence that the allegations by a woman he seduced should not be viewed on

moral or religious principles on national television (ENCA 2025), then we should be concerned that our land has become a moral and spiritual morass. If the principles of law are in the least not morally grounded, then our country is indeed on a dangerous and destructive trajectory. Suffice it to say that South Africans have raised red flags for the last 30 years about the failures and unwillingness of the South African Police to provide communities and individuals the protection and safety they deserve. These examples reveal the status quo of a failed state and a passive-avoidant country leader who remains mum in the face of the worst unimaginable leadership atrocities. I argue that many of these leadership types are worshipped as ‘gods’ by followers – the main reason why they are enabled to perpetrate unthinkable immoral actions and behaviour. Consider the research findings of a community-based workshop with leaders conducted in Khayelitsha, Cape Town, during 2008 (Dames 2008). The participants identified their top five leaders at local, national and provincial levels. The listed leaders were all political leaders, even though we referred to leaders and not ‘political leaders’. Participants were then prompted to motivate their responses.¹ Varied responses surfaced about their expectations for political leaders;² ethical political challenges in South Africa;³ and in their immediate communities.⁴ These research findings re-emphasise after 17 years the daily depressed and oppressed reality or worldviews of South Africans. Political leaders and their respective political parties have become idols instead of servants of the nation. The idolisation of destructive political and other bad leaders brought our country to an ethical and moral rock-bottom reality – an evil abyss where corrupt and criminal elements are being protected by political leadership and influential and wealthy businesspeople. The introduction of various Ramaphosa commissions of enquiry⁵ into

1: ‘Because our communities face strong political challenges; Because our freedom became politically [orientated]. Politics informs everything in SA; Because politics dominate our lives and politicians have a great influence on our lives; Because leaders in our community are not recognized – that’s why we chose politicians – none of us in the group see ourselves as leaders’ (Dames 2018).

2: ‘Can solve problems; Must be accountable to the community and the people that elected them; Must be totally against corruption and work for economic justice; Patience to deal with people’s issues; Must be humble; Must communicate openly with the people; Accountability for their actions’ (Dames 2018).

3: ‘All leaders must have an ethical value system that informs everything they do and say; Other challenges facing ethical political leadership are: Honesty, No corruption, Accountability, Setting example to others of the correct way to live your life, Setting an example to others by having impeccable personal conduct; Political leaders must stop thinking about their own interests and that of their political parties; Ethical political leadership requires high moral standards and high levels of discipline; Ethical political leadership must be based on respect; Bring back ubuntu at all levels of society – political leadership must lead; Political leaders must not personalize politics – this impacts on their followers who are forced to take sides – this impacts on communities’ (Dames 2018).

4: ‘There is a huge problem of a lack of ethical political leadership and its impacts on the lives of people at a local level; Those with means do not give back to community – political leadership with means are not setting an example; As leaders we are accountable to those we lead. When we fight those, we are supposed to serve are the ones that get hurt the most; Most politicians are driven by self-interest and personal agendas; They leave those that voted and supported then behind once they are in power; We have lost the values we fought to in the struggle against apartheid; We have a serious problem with greedy politicians; Political camps are destroying political participation at a local level – it forces people at local level to take sides in political conflict they know little about; Ethical political leaders mean the culture of self-enrichment must stop; Leaders must regain respect and humanity for themselves; When I decide to vote for a leader – this leader must comply with the principles of ethical political leadership’ (Dames 2018).

5: 18 June 2018, Nugent Commission into SARS; 17 October 2018, PIC Commission; 29 November 2018 Mokgoro Commission into Jiba & Mrwebi; 29 May 2025, TRC Delayed Cases Commission; and 13 July 2025, New Commission into SAPS Corruption’ (SAPS Turmoil: New Addition to South Africa’s long list of commissions of inquiry ENCA 2025).

allegations or evidence of corruption has become a political norm of 'covering up' crime and corruption and a means to shift leadership responsibility and accountability to 'neutral agencies' to name and shame politically aligned corrupt leaders. South Africans in general are being subdued. The ANC is a criminal syndicate in the aftermath of the president's announcement that Mchunu, the minister of police has been implicated in explosive allegations of involvement with organised crime syndicates and interfering with special police units assigned to expose and prosecute criminals (Thambo 2025). Therefore, *quo vadis*, deceitful and corrupt leaders in South Africa? How do we respond to critical leadership challenges today? What worldview informs our assumptions, dispositions and actions about leadership challenges? Smit (2009:43) asserts the role of Christian theology as a precursor of traditions of correlation, accountability and apology to redress the challenges of contemporary societies. This raises the question: Can we equate broad-based leadership corruption as the product of centuries of poverty and oppression during apartheid? If so, is it plausible that followers or supporters of these leaders and their political parties are worshipping them as idols who have turned the tables on previously white capitalist and political power?

Hence, the idolisation of bad leaders and political parties is a dangerous practice that may even allow embracing leaders with malignant narcissist tendencies (Wilkerson 2023:9). Their followers could be blindsided beyond their own consciousness of similar historic and/or imminent dangers (Leibholz 1980:12–14; Wilkerson 2023:7ff.). The metaphor of silent earthquakes perpetuated by the destructive behaviour and action of idol leaders could prove catastrophic for humanity (Wilkerson 2023:11).

Invisible leadership skeletons

The danger of distorted leadership could be compared with an invisible skeleton – a leadership system, an artificial design of 'a fixed and embedded ranking of human value that sets the presumed supremacy of one group against the presumed inferiority of other groups' based on life-and-death realities favouring evil leadership hierarchies of the dominant caste (Wilkerson 2023:17). This could explain why millions of poor blacks and minority racial groups in South Africa are reliving structural racism and discrimination by being marginalised and treated as inferior to black people's culture. Consider how the caste systems of Nazi Germany and India and the racialised caste pyramid in the United States of America were designed to stigmatise, dehumanise, disadvantage and oppress other human beings as inferior. I concur with Wilkerson (2023:18) that what we as South Africans are witnessing is the hidden *and* visible power, authority and assumed competence exerted by destructive leaders. In his book, *Leading in the 21st century*, Marwala (2021) asks 'Where to with South Africa?' He urges competent leaders and grassroots communities to change the current political dispensation by advancing a new generation of skilled, racially and gender diverse educated

leaders, a meritocratic communal-leadership system instead of dysfunctional self-serving political leaders (2021:6).

The primary focus of this article is to raise awareness of and redress destructive idol leadership assumptions and practices. It raises the question: *How can destructive idol leaders become conscious of their hidden and potentially harmful behaviour and actions?* This question lies at the root of any idol leadership and the consequent human misery and suffering in the world. Such leaders are idol creators, perpetuating a need for followers to worship them as idols. Redressing hidden and harmful assumptions by exposing destructive leadership is imperative (Mahony 2018; Wilkerson 2023).

The failure of theology

Theology did not always attend to leaders and followers who hold distorted assumptions or worldviews of others or about themselves – failing to redress the pervasiveness of the resultant suffering it inflicted upon societies. For instance, Eurocentric theology has often chosen to remain oblivious to the divide between those who enjoyed privilege and those who were oppressed. For centuries some Christian leaders opted for innocence, a perceived unawareness of human atrocities – to be blameless in the face of human misery (Boesak 1977:7). The influence and intentions of leaders are therefore revealing in any society (Boesak 1977:78; Koteich 2025).

Boesak, for example, called for the rejection of deceitful innocence by white leaders in South Africa during the apartheid era. Many white leaders sustained an evil system by maintaining their innocence based on the presumption of an inherited white superiority and stewardship over blacks as the will of God (Boesak 1977:8–9). The scope of leaders' accountability should extend to black countries, the West and the developing world because oppression and colonialism go hand in hand (1977:9). White supremacy and a slave mentality of being oppressed highlight the banality of evil inflicted by deep-seated leadership distortions. I concur, at least here with Mbeki (1998:33), that the pervasive destruction by bad leaders is based on 'the corruption of minds and souls as a result of the pursuit of an ignoble effort to perpetuate a veritable crime against humanity'.

'Quo vadis' distorted leadership worldviews and assumptions?

Worldviews are mostly preconsciously projected dispositions, according to Habermas (in Branson & Martinez 2011:Loc 1094). To illustrate this, Habermas elevates certain aspects of our consciousness to broaden our worldviews by enabling us to 'genuinely' communicate with people who are different from us. For instance, he identifies the following as elements of consciousness, namely, nature and the 'other'; time and progress; and reality (visible and invisible). I will focus on nature and the 'other' as one of the determinant aspects, which shaped the Scotch-Irish worldviews at the hands of an

oppressive British empire (Branson & Martinez 2011:Loc 1093, 1108). The resultant Scotch-Irish distorted worldviews have had a devastating impact on Native Americans. However, Native Americans, in contrast, were shaped within an integrated worldview of the embodiment of nature as a gift from God (Branson & Martinez 2011:Loc 1108). They embraced the assumption of prioritising the sacredness and humanity of others and creation (Branson & Martinez 2011:Loc 1122; ed. Foster 2013). Phillips (2025:13–14, 67–68), in the same vein, recounts how The First Nation People, The Khoi and San of South Africa (similar to Native Americans), lived in harmony with a deep spiritual relation with nature, human beings and the God of creation. Although Dutch colonialists stole their land, they could not diminish their souls – their souls were humiliated, but they survived (2025:15, 45, 58).

Andrews (2002:Loc 155) reminds us how slavery and social systems of racism violently shattered African worldviews. The brutal separation of Africans from their ancestral homes, traditions, cultures and languages fractured and destroyed their religious traditions and patterns of living. However, it did not obliterate the dynamic of African cultural and religious worldviews (Andrews 2002:Loc 155–174). The application of Habermas' preconscious methodology to the South African political governing leadership reveals a *narrowing*, instead of a broadening, of issues related to nature and its citizenry (in Branson & Martinez 2011:Loc 999–1030). Is it plausible that the virus of corruption today relates to the inhuman suffering of millions of black people during apartheid? If so, why is it that millions of black people, brown people and Indian people are reliving the atrocities of apartheid in a 'democratic' or autocratic dispensation?

These historical and contemporary examples of slavery and oppression highlight the implications of distorted worldviews. Leaders should, therefore, be encouraged to cultivate humane relational worldviews in complex and changing times (Branson & Martinez 2011:Loc 1121; Roxburgh 2005:19ff).

An extreme historical example of a distorted worldview is how some Nazi leaders inflicted human destruction at Auschwitz in Germany. In *Hannah Arendt and Ethics after Auschwitz*, now 80 years ago, Mahony (2018) opts for Arendt's ethics to analyse the atrocities of an evil era at the hands of Adolf Eichmann:

The year 2011 marked the fiftieth anniversary of the trial of Adolf Eichmann in Jerusalem, on which Arendt had famously (and controversially) reported. Arendt's contribution has engendered a revitalized interest of the origins of totalitarian government, ideology and propaganda, authoritarianism and racism. (p. 2)

Today, as during the 1930s, Europe is witnessing a resurgence of right-wing populism and complacency (Mahony 2018:2–3). Arendt distinguishes between the 'common life' of a political community and 'the real world' of 'real people' to accentuate the divide between those in power and those without power (in Mahony 2018:3). Therefore, the behaviour of leaders

should reciprocate genuine communicative and performative actions as a moral imperative for the common good of all (Mahony 2018:5).

However, in the absence of moral behaviour from leaders, individuals such as Eichmann can succumb to acts of evil. It is thus crucial to know the intentions and motivations of the Eichmann perpetrator type to understand how a nation became complicit in practices of monstrous evil (Mahony 2018):

Moral codes, felt by many to be in some sense essentially inviolable, had crumbled to the extent that what was once an obvious crime now assumed the mantle of an unpleasant obligation in accordance with a higher law of nature. (pp. 6–7)

Mahony (2018:10, 17) raises ethical questions about the plausibility of the banality of evil. How does someone possess a conscious intention or lack thereof to act evil – to engage as a perpetrator in evil acts? How does someone hold a liminal disposition between thoughtlessness and evildoing and prevention of doing evil through reflective processes? How can someone live with themselves with a split personality by acting in solitude when doing evil? Why could a leader refuse to be implicit in being accountable for immoral personal and communal crimes? Prudent and good leaders will do well to confront similar evil occurrences in society. The following traits of danger should be exposed and rejected, namely totalitarianism, political liberalism, dogmatic secularism, slavish feudalism, distortion, harmful preconsciousness and Cesar worship consciousness (Branson & Martinez 2011; Butler et al. 2011; ed. Foster 2013; Mahony 2018; Malik 2023). 'Idoltrous worship of profane things' should prompt 'vigilance against idolatry' (Butler et al. 2011:105–106).

Towards a theoretical framework of Christian leadership types

In this section, I offer a theological critique that informs a reversal of destructive power and authority resonating with the Christo-praxis servanthood model of Christ. Different leadership types (generic, Christian, spiritual, charismatic, transformational and servanthood) form the essence of the theoretical critique.

Generic leadership

According to research, implicit leadership and implicit followership theories reveal how the dynamic and complex nature of perceptions and sense-making between leaders and followers could provide better insight into the behaviour of leaders and followers. In a connectionist framework, perceptions of leaders and followers prove to be fluid and context sensitive but simultaneously coherently consistent. Hence, leadership and followership are viewed as a social influence process (Foti et al. 2017:261). Therefore, social changes necessitate changes of leadership styles to create meaning-making relations with followers. For instance, the social identity model frames creativeness as an attribute for the construction of adaptive leadership identities. Adaptive

and innovative leaders are critical in the light of rapid social and cultural changes and instrumental for the socio-religious identity of communities.

However, some leaders encompass a measure of hierarchy. Leadership theory distinguishes theories of leadership with formal power traits from non-leadership with informal power. Cultural and social realities shape leaders, which can function effectively or poorly within systems of relationships (Shamir & Eilam-Shamir 2017:579ff.). Hence, a leader could be defined as someone who exerts a certain measure of power or influence over their followers. In response to research that mainly focuses on leadership traits, behaviour and leader-follower relationships that determine the influence on and self-understanding of followers, Reh, Van Quaquebeke and Giessner (2017:486–487) have explored how leadership charisma does not only operate explicitly between leaders and followers but also through embodiment dimensions. Their research focuses on the embodiment of human perception by indicating how it can inform charismatic leadership. Charisma relates to the dynamic and direct intersection of embodied dimensions between leaders, followers and their immediate context. Hence, charismatic leaders can consistently influence their followers either positively or negatively.

Christian leadership

However, Christian leaders function within a Christian context. Their leadership is determined by Christian values, which can transcend church boundaries irrespective of whether others choose to follow them (Kessler 2010:530). Christian leaders are, therefore, instrumental to envisioning and exerting socio-religious changes of their communities, which intersect with spiritual resources and the church through its role in society (Barentsen 2015:52–53). Within a Christian context, leadership is informed by transcendental values and beliefs encapsulated in Christian spirituality. Defining Christian spirituality and the elements which constitute Christian leadership is therefore imperative, i.e. Christian spirituality is aspiring to attainment of the eternal, transcendental goals for the good of all (Dames 2023). It is a transforming power embodying the image of Christ towards spiritual maturity. In their research Dreyer and Hermans (2014:5–8) postulate the elements that constitute Christian spirituality in Christian leadership.

Christian spiritual leadership

The beliefs and values of Christian spirituality are encapsulated in the Word of God, the gospels of the salvific work of Christ, the law of love of neighbour and self, belief in the transcendent – the manifestation of God's kingdom on earth, Jesus' resurrection from the grave and the role of the Holy Spirit. The Christian life exemplifies costly discipleship and growing into maturity in Christ. Repentance from sin and forsaking all other 'gods' (idols) is the core of Christian spirituality. Christian spirituality resonates with walking in the word of God and the Spirit and manifesting good works through the power of the Holy Spirit. These

elements constitute the essence of Christian leadership as espoused by a Christian spirituality of love for God and neighbour as encapsulating the key commandments of God as revealed in the Word (Dames 2023; Barentsen et al. 2016:4–11). I draw on previous insights below to emphasise the value and dynamic of spirituality in relation to transformational leadership (Dames 2019).

Spirituality fosters the feeling of fulfilment, happiness, self-value, hope, optimism and meaningful experience. The goals people strive for are transcendental concerns or transcendental life goals (Paul Tillich in Versteegh 2011:11):

Spiritual transformation is defined as the process of reaching self-awareness to unify the divided self. This drive to unify the divided self gives spiritual transformation existential relevance: human beings experience their form of existence (self) as unbalanced, split, heterogeneous (disequilibrium), or (conversely) they become aware of how they can achieve balance, greater unity. (Hermans 2013:182)

Spirituality is how we experience existentially relevant and unexpected transcendental meaning. It is about meaningful experiences of movement, change, development, transition and process or power causing change in the human self towards the transcendental meaning of the self – the true self (Hermans 2013:169–171).

The power of change is both the source and the goal of transformation. If change in form does not lead to the desired state of ultimacy (transcendence) the power of change is not considered to be spiritual (Hermans 2013:171). Hence, spirituality is a search for and means of reaching beyond human existence. It creates a sense of connectedness with the world and with the unifying source of life [...] an expression of people's profound need for coherent meaning, love and happiness. The need to create coherent meaning (in terms of wholeness, fullness and ultimacy) is inherent for our very existence as human beings (Cloninger in Dreyer & Hermans 2014:3).

Contingencies in life necessitate the reconstruction of our lives in a meaningful order (Scherer-Rath 2014:82, 86; Van den Brand et al. 2014:104). Spiritual transformation is key in this instance (Hermans & Koerts 2013:209). It is reflected in changes in leaders' choices, decisions and actions as a way for them to be formed, to be enabled to lead a meaningful life or to be fulfilled (Scherer-Rath 2007:85).

Spiritual transformation shapes how (balanced perceptions) can help to link elements of spirituality, leadership and biographical (worldviews), that is, 'how meaning attributed to existential events and how that meaning affects the intentionality of behaviour' (Van den Brand et al. 2014:105). Balanced worldviews refer to how the different (perceptions or assumptions) relate to the change in a leader's life and how leaders gain an awareness of who they are and who they are in terms of their (lived-experiences) and spiritual fullness in moments of change (Scherer-Rath 2007:81, 85). Change enhances understanding through form (such as joy or suffering) or the discovery of identity, mission, vision, and

life goals (Hermans 2012; Van den Brand et al. 2014:104–105). There is a reciprocity of meaning as an interactive agent, and form in lieu of a dynamism between character and circumstances in contingencies. The form of contingency whether active or passive, shapes identity molded according to any given situation. Hence, life stories impart meaning to significant existential situations, episodes, and or events (2014:13, 82). Who we are as leaders affects our decisions and actions. Meaning relates to the levels of intensity of contingency and/or the depth of our decisions, choices and actions. Hence, it relates to crisis events or incidents. ‘People shape their personal identity by reconstructing their life stories through assigning meaning to significant existential events’ (Van den Brand et al. 2014:104). Meaning, identity, or values assist leaders in reaching spiritual fullness or transcendental life goals (Van den Brand et al. 2014:105). Where do our transcendental life goals come from? As situationally, existentially and spiritually contingent persons, we move from one position to another or simply change. We therefore need a grounding, a foundation beyond our own. This foundation can be either immanent or transcendent, active or passive (Dames 2019).

Spiritual transformation is critical for leaders to recreate or change their form and role from a continuum of disequilibrium to equilibrium.

Transformational leadership

Hermans (2020) believes that traditional religious variables are insufficient in determining leadership in a modern era. However, spiritual leadership can respond more effectively to the need for meaning, love, wellness and wholeness for our existence as human beings. Spirituality is a determinant of holistic leadership (cognitive, conative, affective, judging and acting) in shaping effective leaders (Hermans 2020:1–4). For instance, complexities in South African schools prompted an empirical study, which explored the relation between spirituality and leadership styles. The research findings revealed a preference of school leaders for ‘the transformational leadership style as opposed to transactional leadership, corrective leadership and passive-avoidant leadership’ (Dreyer & Hermans 2014:7). Transformational leadership focuses on four behavioural changes, namely, idealist influence (simulating the leader); high-order reflection (conscientisation of challenges and solutions); individualised or follower empowerment; and inspirational motivation (Avolio, Walumbwa & Weber 2009; Bass 1985).

Hence, some Christian exponents base leadership on the common distinction between task competence – high leadership performance levels; transactional leadership – a mutual reciprocal influencing of and exchange with others and transforming leadership – enhancing deep cultural, identity, vision and mission changes. These leadership traits, according to Osmer (2008:176–178, 192ff), are inadequate insofar as the conceptualisation of the goal of change is concerned.

Servant spiritual leadership transformation

Servanthood leadership is consequently proposed, based on Christ’s reconfiguration of power and authority by embodying the form and practice of a servant (Osmer 2008:192). Thus, servant leadership entails mutual care and service dispositions and the defying of hierarchies of power and social status. Servant leadership embraces nonviolent love by rejecting power in terms of violence and retribution. It influences and inspires nonchristian communities to embrace the servanthood of Christ (Osmer 2008:192). But even so, what is the essence of the abovementioned leadership traits? The concept of *spirituality* is quintessential in this regard. Thus, spirituality in essence refers to transformation. As such, the concept of *transformation* or *transforming* refers to the notion of form, change and process. Transformation is the embodiment, the active form of servant leadership of Christ. Spiritual leadership is the encapsulation of the transformation of leadership forms, a unique type of power capable of altering situations, people or communities in a continuum. Defined as Christian spirituality, it relates to the agency of the Holy Spirit (Osmer 2008:27). Spiritual and transformational leadership resonate, thus, with charismatic leadership and authentic leadership. Growing evidence suggests that the value of authentic leadership enhances followership. However, leaders with self-interest cannot advance the interests of the collective. However, leaders who do foster authentic leadership and followership traits advance the common good of all (Steffens et al. 2016:729). Christo-praxis servanthood, for me at least, encapsulates all those good and value-based traits of leadership.

Thus, Christian spirituality provides a continuum of transcendental values and beliefs. Power is vested in God and the Holy Spirit. Power is thus not a merely earthly capacity secured with human or natural sources and wealth. Leadership based on the latter is destined for failure, corruption and idol worshipping. Power in the Christian context is power of the Holy Spirit, not of human doing (Acts 1:9). Power imparted through the Holy Spirit in the Christian context leads to transformational leadership as exemplified by the servanthood leadership style of Christ. Christo-praxis seeks the transformation of destructive leadership power and authority.

The issue of power and authority in leadership

Recent research findings suggest that there is a tendency to dismantle the power and authority of leaders, particularly in organisational settings. However, leadership is conceptualised as an influencer *beyond* the dynamics engendered by power, authority and its appropriation in different settings (Shamir & Eilam-Shamir 2017:580). This notion holds that anybody can be a leader. As such, the notion of shared and distributed leadership has emerged. Thus, the relationship between leaders and followers became obsolete. Kellerman (2004:xvi) departs from conventional theories that view leaders who abuse power and authority as *non-leaders*, for the abdication of formal leadership authority could negate the basic

principles of good or authentic spiritual leadership (Shamir & Eilam-Shamir 2017:580). Similarly, Kessler (2010:528) guards against such tendencies by arguing that leadership is incomprehensible without power. Theorising and appropriating spiritual transformational power are therefore quintessential to establishing a theoretical framework for responsible or authentic leadership. It is evident from our discussion thus far, that such a quest can be developed with philosophical, theological, sociological and cross-cultural management theories (Kessler 2010:531–547).

Kessler (2010) offers four classic formulations of power. Power features within social relationship in which persons exert their own free will to embrace or resist certain conditions or situations. Power can thus produce intentional outcomes. Power can change realities, but it can also be misused to overpower someone to do what they do not want to do. By reconceptualising power and authority, a reversal of the notion of *power over* changes to *power as mutual care and self-giving* in engendering the common good of society (Kessler 2010:531ff; Osmer 2008:191). Therefore, leadership and power agencies should eradicate exclusion and serve the holistic needs of others. It is a fine art of spirituality to opt between holding onto power or giving away power (Tebresch 2013:61). Leadership that succumbs to power and authority for self-serving motives could be destructive and costly. For instance, the abuse of money, sex and power could be destructive for some of the most influential leaders in the world (Granberg-Michaelson 2004:21–35). The next section deals with the rationale for abusive power and authority for self-serving purposes.

The dark side of leadership and followership

The notion of power and authority in leadership brings to bear an alternative notion of the distortion or perversion of power and authority in leadership.

Research reveals that the tectonic plates of leadership are shifting from romantic, positive and progressive conceptualisations of leadership towards the darker side of leaders. Destructive and narcissistic leaders, for instance, can inflict intentional or even unintentional harm on society or organisations (Koteich 2025; Malik 2023; Schvns & Hansbrough 2010:Loc 90 of 1190). Furthermore, transgressions of bad leadership that intersect with colluding followers exacerbates the dark side of leadership. Redressing such destructive leadership practices requires a reconceptualisation of leadership in terms of a holistic perspective of leadership, as discussed in the abovementioned sections.

The reconceptualisation of bad leadership should factor in leadership tendencies, such as entitlement or claiming; distorted reasoning; questionable practices of creating or causing harm and destructiveness; and incompetency, rigidity, intemperateness, callousness, proneness to being corrupt, insularity and being evil (Kellerman 2004:37–46). We should confront such tendencies of leaders with critical questions: Why is it that followers are loyal to bad leaders, or

why do they tolerate and suffer at the hands of destructive leaders? It is a tragic irony that some followers, despite the harmful conduct of such leaders, enable and sustain their destructive behaviour. Such leaders seek recognition by appealing to the psychological and existential needs of people. They abuse their followers' anxieties and fears and their longing for self-esteem, security and meaning for self-serving purposes. Self-serving needs of followers could render them susceptible to toxic or destructive leaders (Lipman-Blumen 2023:29–48, 125–138).

Furthermore, the abuse of authority on all strata of society, even across the world, points to pervasive practices of destructive leadership. Destructive leaders can inflict harm on vulnerable followers, especially if environments are conducive for their ill purposes. Hence, such a theoretical framework demonstrates why 'a toxic triangle consisting of destructive leaders, susceptible followers and a conducive environment' functions with impunity (Padilla, Hogan & Kaiser 2007:176). The following determinant factors can enable and sustain destructive leaders, namely: (1) their use of charisma, need for power, distorted worldviews, narcissism and a preference for hate; (2) susceptible followers, conformers or colluders (by allowing bad leaders to assume power because of their unrealised needs or immaturity) or those who excel in an environment relating to their worldview; and (3) environmental instability, propagating a perceived threat, distorted cultural values and poor governance and institutionalism. The establishment of conducive environments for destructive leadership practices and the role of colluding followers can disrupt and corrupt foundational systems and manipulate people or communities. The modus operandi is usually to exploit institutions, followers or unsuspected people by using propaganda to legitimise their self-serving purposes (Padilla et al. 2007:178–188). Destructive leadership can therefore be defined as the systematic and pervasive behaviour of bad leaders that violates the legitimate interests of a community. They use mechanisms to undermine and sabotage the ideals, resources, effectiveness and well-being of communities and/or institutions. Practices of bullying, confrontation and destructive behaviour usually characterise the profile of bad leaders (Einarsen, Aasland & Skogstad 2007).

Drawing from our foregoing discussion, work needs to be done to redress the *dark side of leadership and followership*, which promotes the idolisation of bad leaders. For instance, conventional conceptualisations of leadership in Africa should be redressed based on a philosophy of decoloniality (Lizardy-Hyjbi 2024:16ff; 22). Individualised self-serving notions of leadership with a focus on form and function, power-centring, expertise, efficiency and sole agency of change need redress. Moreover, leadership practices should be disrupted by elevating the complexities and diverse realities and African worldviews. Furthermore, conventional theories, i.e. authentic, transformational, charismatic and servant leadership, require redress in terms of the multiple complexities within the role and function of leadership in diverse contexts (Lizardy-Hyjbi 2024:19, 22). A case in point is that most of the leadership theories fail to advance the symbolic, mystical

leadership of Mother Teresa in religion; Nelson Mandela in politics; Bill Gates in business; and Princess Diana in humanitarian endeavours (Bass 1985). The gap between authentic and bad leadership practices is fertile ground for the idolisation of destructive leadership behaviour and actions.

Pervasive and destructive idol leaders

The notion of the distortion of power and authority in leadership evokes questions of why destructive leadership incurs following.

The idolisation of good and bad leadership practices in the South African context became a prominent phenomenon pre- and post-1994. The first democratically elected President, Nelson Mandela, and his peers were previously incarcerated on Robben Island (Mandela 1995). These leaders exemplified rare models of leadership with a public and communal consciousness of accountability, determination and love for all the people of the land. They demonstrated a collective consciousness of rejecting any form of leadership idolisation and inspired citizens to emulate servant leadership and a passion and empathy for humanity (Mandela 2010; Naudé 1985).

Ironically and tragically, a contrary reality dawned on South Africans. During the tenure of the third president of South Africa, Pauw (2017:11) exposed the banality of a corrupt mafia state leadership: 'Zuma and his small band have managed not only to capture our law enforcement agencies – put their pals in charge, make cases disappear, dismantle structures, [prompt] trumped-up charges and harassment'. An evil and depressing era of destructive leadership practices began to haunt millions of South Africans. Many of their followers worshipped these bad leaders as idols (Pauw 2017). The insight of Rose (2023) is telling in this regard. She equates the notion of leaders as monsters with the notion of superheroes – idol leaders in a pseudo-superhero universe (2023:3). Idolisation of leaders may even equate to models of the Antichrist, holds Leibholz (1980):

For Bonhoeffer Hitler was the Antichrist, the arch-destroyer of the world and its basic values, the Antichrist who enjoys destruction, slavery, death and extinction for their own sake, the Antichrist who wants to pose the negative as positive and as creative. (pp. 23–24)

We can concur that a new world order is saturated with a continuum of the idolisation of either good or bad leaders.

Religious leaders are no exception. Dumas (1990:145) shares how Beyers Naudé (1985) inspired him to confront Dutch Reformed-idols and white sins. The phenomenon of idol worship and heresy theology was a form of human worship (1990:146). The sin of racism, the basis of apartheid needed to be confronted with a theology of resistance. Instead, many white leaders failed to respond. Consequently, their failure fostered alienation, separation, animosity and hatred that culminated in civil violence pre- and post 1994 (1990:144–147).

Recent atrocities of the destructiveness of religious leaders who immigrated from Kenya and Nigeria to South Africa, brought a new evil to the fore. These leaders, namely, Omotoso and Bushiri can be described with the biblical notion of wolves in sheep clothes. They descended upon South Africans to prey on susceptible and vulnerable women and children. Posing as 'pastors or prophets' of God, they established Christian churches with the sole aim to defraud and abuse their followers with the façade of a prosperity gospel ministry. Their followers worship them as idols. Tragically, in this instance, political, religious and judicial leaders proved incompetent to protect their people (Majadibodu 2025; Tyali 2025). This scourge is an indictment for a country that was once renowned for a progressive theology of liberation and authentic and revolutionary church leaders.

Thus, the focus of this article is to raise awareness and redress idol leadership. The question is: How can the followers of idol leaders, or themselves become conscious of their hidden and potentially harmful behaviour? This question lies in the underlying causes of the idolisation of leadership and consequent human misery and suffering. Such leaders are idol creators by perpetuating a need for followers to worship them as idols. It is thus imperative to redress hidden and harmful assumptions about bad leaders by exposing destructive leadership practices (Mahony 2018; Wilkerson 2023). The next section proposes a response to the *quo vadis* question of the idolisation of destructive leaders.

A theological critique

In view of a broad spectrum or continuum of leadership styles, which range from pragmatic, good leadership styles to the distortion of perversion of power, we turn our attention to the alternatives which a theological perspective can provide for leadership. Here concepts such as *idolisation*, *sin*, *worldviews*, *bad and distorted leaders* and *culture creators* are examined within a theological framework in the critique of Christo-praxis leadership. This critique is framed by the foregoing discussions and contributions of theologians such as Goto (2018), Bevans (2005), Pui-lan (2005) and others.

A theological critique is now necessary to grasp the full ferocity of leaders who entice susceptible followers to worship them as idols for self-serving purposes, which could cause harm to others or institutions. Idol worshipping can be sinful and dangerous:

Idolatry aggrandizes those with the most social capital and does violence to those who must conform to be recognized. Those who are oppressed are forced to conform or be complicit when [leaders ...] are [...] welcomed into the center and benefit from its protection and group identity. (Goto 2018:13–14)

The idolisation of good or bad leaders can perpetuate idolatry. We need, therefore, to dismantle and rebuild practices of power and privilege to redress destructive idol leaders and susceptible or complacent followers (Goto 2018:16–17). If we fail to do so, we will perpetuate a world with adverse, self-serving leaders or destructive effects for

the marginalised (Goto 2018:17, 21). We should remember that 'Christendom was in real danger of regressing to a form of Caesar-worship' (ed. Foster 2013:xvii).

Drawing on Branson and Martinez's (2011:Loc 1798) sociocultural perspective, I maintain that idolisation of dangerous leaders could perpetuate empires with impunitively power.

Theoretical trajectories of bad leaders

Drawing from Goto (2018), similar sentiments about trajectories of idolising bad leaders are echoed by interlocutors such as Wolterstorff (2002), Bevans (2005) and Pui-lan (2005). Schleiermacher, for instance, maintains that idol worship is a degraded practice. Suffice it to say that his cultural and political context was tainted by a bourgeois worldview of the middle class and capitalism, the foundation of historical and contemporary misery for the marginalised and despised (in Pui-lan 2005:192–193). Therefore, the analysis of Wolterstorff (2002) is worth noting. He laments the global injustices and suffering, the consequence of a conflation of sin and idolatry. It is idolatry conceived of as merely a matter of human failure or fallenness. This explains why some people idolise wealth, privilege, power and the aggrandisement of good or bad leaders. This is because the manifestation of sin is reduced to idolatry. The end result is an enslavement to the idolisation of authentic or destructive leaders (Wolterstorff 2002:77): 'A world system in which core dominates and exploits periphery, shaped by idols that compete with the Lord and by the ordinary lust for wealth and power ...' (2002:133–134). It is therefore imperative to break the scourge of destructive idol leaders, for idol trajectories are intergenerationally transferred (Goto 2018:228). The failure of some Christian leaders to expose and redress harmful practices of dangerous leaders who are idolised by susceptible followers is an indictment (Bevans 2005:29, 31).

Redressing destructive idol trajectories

It is therefore prudent to counter the culture of destructive idol co-construction of leaders by dismantling it and reconstructing authentic, trustworthy leaders (Goto 2018:193). Good leaders who exude compassion and solidarity are critical agents for the well-being of all. For instance, religious leaders should therefore retain their prophetic role by providing a clear moral vision, embodying empathy for human misery and despair in the world.

Therefore, any self-serving leadership assumptions projected onto society, are untenable and should be discarded (Volf 2011:67ff). Social media exacerbates this deep-seated problem on a scale and pace that seems uncontrollable. There is a tendency to impose cultural, transnational corporate and tribe assumptions on others. Historical and contemporary Christian leaders seem to fail in their prophetic task to redress this phenomenon (Volf 2011:5–15). For instance, Foster's (ed. 2013) reflection on the history of England during 1557 is characterised by contradictions, oppression and barbarity.

He depicts life in England at the time as a 'seemingly hopeless culture of corruption and failures' (ed. 2013:xiii). However, his notion of 'Eurocentric civic morality, foundational-stones and pilgrims in the wilderness of America' is an insult to those First Nation Peoples who were marginalised and oppressed. Some European leaders were renowned for their abuse of power and distortion and perversion of truth and righteousness (ed. Foster 2013:xiii–xiv).

Redressing distorted leadership anthropologies

Despite awareness of the implications of destructive leadership and susceptible followership, abusive and corrupt leadership behaviour remains mostly unaddressed. Some of these leaders are probably oblivious of their powerful and potentially destructive behaviour (Goto 2018:xiii). These negative leadership traits originate generally from a distorted anthropology. Redressing distorted views of leaders is to deal with what Goto calls 'the gods [...] their judgements and beliefs we unconsciously elevate and sacralize' (Goto 2018:xiv–xv). Distorted perceptions of leaders should therefore be critiqued and challenged to reconstruct notions of authentic leadership with a greater societal awareness (2018:xv). Therefore, any form or function of leadership hegemonies and hierarchies within ourselves and our immediate realities requires redress (Goto 2018:xvii). Failure to do so can enhance lacunas that threaten the well-being of communities, institutions and the future of society (2018:xv).

Drawing from our discussion so far, we can deduce that idol leaders are primarily the product of how followers perceive and value them. Whether political liberalism, totalitarianism or intentional impositions, bad idol leaders can unleash destructive consequences. Redressing these harmful actions of leaders necessitates proactive, dedicated action. New experiences and insights are attainable only when leaders can move beyond their prior distorted worldviews by creating a new authentic or ethical culture of leadership.

Leaders as culture or 'culture' creators

Following Freire (1998), I assert that the worldview of idolised leaders (good or bad) within a culture of patronage can perpetuate the belief that they alone can change things – holding real power to shape the world as culture creators. Based on Freire's view, we live in a world with two cultures: a selective dominant hegemonic culture of the idolisation of leaders and a dejected and marginalised citizenry (in Branson & Martinez 2011:Loc 1896; Freire 1998:xxix). Compare the section on contemporary and historical perspectives of leaders. The marginalised are normally unaware of their capacity to become culture creators to build a new culture of leaders as models with integrity (2011). We are dealing with two opposing worldviews characteristic of privilege and power juxtaposed with severe poverty and powerlessness.

However, leadership has a lot to do with social relational dynamics (Goto 2018:51). Mandela (2010) exemplifies this dynamic praxis of social relations free from any discriminative tendencies. Such leadership praxes are foundational for leaders' spiritual life beyond a mere moral or ethical life. From a theological perspective, therefore, the spiritual life of leaders can foster virtues of honesty, sincerity, collaboration, humility, generosity and a readiness to serve humanity. Mandela (2010) embodied these spiritual traits and would be the first to acknowledge his own shortcomings.

Christian spiritual leadership

Hence, social relational power in terms of spiritual leadership, modelled according to the servanthood model, is a deterrent for self-serving personal intentions. It should be elevated to enhance leadership, which espouses traits conducive to the 'common good' of society (Bass & Steidlmeier 1999:186). Thus, altruistic values for the common good are an imperative. Self serving interests violates altruistic values and should be rejected (Price 2003:80). Spirituality in and through Christian leadership can redress destructive idol leaders, conducive environments for corruption and susceptible followers of deceitful leaders.

To reiterate, Christian spirituality ought to provide a continuum of transcendental values and beliefs. It is in contrast with destructive or bad leaders aggrandising idolatry, sin and self-seeking power and wealth. In Christian leadership God, His Word, His power and His will are central. Christian or spiritual good leaders should, thus, embody the beliefs, values and ethics composite of Christian spirituality. Their goals should align with the goals and vision of Christian spirituality – transcendental seeking of God's kingdom on earth through social justice, equity, righteousness and mercy for the oppressed. Hence, the prophetic role of Christian leaders is to be a voice for the oppressed with a clear moral vision based on the Word of God.

I concur with Osmer (2008:192ff) that true authentic leadership, particularly Christian leaders, should imitate the Christo-praxis servant leadership of Christ. Bonhoeffer, for example, was the greatest patriot of Germany, choosing death instead of privilege and power (Leibholz 1980:22). Bonhoeffer's life-and-death inspired world leaders with hope for the future. Such a leadership style can be placed under the categorisation of Christian spirituality. The dynamic role and meaning of spirituality, as discussed under the headings *Christian Spiritual Leadership* and *Servant spiritual leadership transformation*, is not only informative but also tangible, provocative and subversive in the face of evil praxes. Bonhoeffer embodied a new type of true authentic leadership based on the gospel, martyrdom and death:

... imbued by a new spirit of Christian humanism and a creative sense of civic duty. The victory which he has won was a victory for us all, a conquest never to be undone, of love, light and liberty. (Leibholz 1980:27)

The servanthood model of Christ, as demonstrated by Dietrich Bonhoeffer's model of costly discipleship, is the continuum of a reversal of destructive power and authority engineered through the idolisation of destructive systems, susceptible followers and bad leaders. Thus, the answer to *quo vadis*, destructive idol leaders, remains a difficult endeavour. Leadership challenges in South Africa remain uncertain, and there is a prolonged urge for hope, as Antonio Machado eloquently captures in his poem: '*Cominante no hay camino se trace el camino al andar* – Traveler there is no road. The road is made as one walks' (Freire 1998:3).

Conclusion

By critiquing the rationale of the idolisation of good or bad leaders, I drew on contemporary and historical perspectives of power-abusive leadership praxes. A theoretical framework of leadership with interlocutors informed the question of why and how the idolisation of authentic and destructive leaders is possible. Susceptible followers and conducive environments in South Africa revealed why and how destructive leaders thrived at the cost of the well-being of society. The reasons why and how leaders succumb to or abuse their power and authority have been explored. It is evident that the conceptualisation of leadership is a daunting task in the light of multiple complexities and fluid realities. Kellerman (2004) postulated that the real problem of the idolisation of destructive leadership is conducive circumstances and susceptible followers enabling and supporting them. The theological critique of the abuse of power and authority demonstrated a need to redress practices of idol worshipping or destructive idol leaders. The ideal is that Christian leaders, for instance, should become selfless servants by modelling the Christo-praxis leadership example of Christ.

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Author's contribution

G.E.D. declares that they are the sole author of this research article.

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