Faith-based Leadership as an Art of Mastering Ambiguity

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Abstract

This article addresses the relationship between leadership and faith-based spirituality in the context of organizational ambiguity.[1] First, it argues that organizations increasingly face competing expectations from different institutional environments and stakeholders, inevitably leading to ambiguous and even contradictory situations of decision-making that managers must somehow deal with. Their learned economic theories and applied business management tools usually aim to dissolve ambiguities and contradictions in favour of a purely economic rationality. This leads to major conflicts between different stakeholder groups in many organizations, and this puts managers under enormous pressure because they cannot please everyone at the same time by making a decision. The question arises of how managers can learn to deal with ambiguity and contradictoriness in a more suitable way for multi-rational decision-making situations, and there is the argument that a certain form of faith-based spirituality can prepare leaders to deal with ambiguity and contradiction more appropriately. Finally, the article concludes by presenting four different strategies on how managers can deal with these phenomena of multiple rationalities in practice.

Keywords: Faith-based Leadership, Ambiguity, Spirituality, Hybrid Organizations.

1. INTRODUCTION

Normally, we do not associate issues of leadership in organizations with religious beliefs or spirituality. On the contrary, one of the great achievements of modern organizational theory is that it has shown that the role a person fills in an organization must be distinguished from the person themselves. The performance of a role has little to do with the personal faith of those who hold that position, and this distinction between a person and their job allows an organization to expect tasks to be dutifully performed, even if the jobholder has different individual opinions and preferences. For example, a person can accept a job as a controller regardless of what religion they belong to, whether they accept their boss' religious opinions, or what political views they associate with. A person and the role they fulfil are two different things, and no one expects an employee to cross certain ethical red lines. According to sociological understanding, this is precisely what distinguishes an organization from a family, where a person is always expected to be completely compliant in their role within that structure. So-called faith-based organizations (FBOs), such as churches, Christian aid organizations or diaconal or social institutions, are exceptions, as job holders within them are expected to embody certain religious beliefs; nevertheless, this would not be critical for a secular organization since they do not recognise how personal beliefs affect job performance. This is the starting point for our considerations: we keep our religious beliefs out of our professional concerns in modern Western societies, separating profession and faith.

In this article, it is shown that a certain kind of religious faith and religious spirituality may be a helpful learning arena for leaders to better deal with ambiguous and contradictory decision-

[1]I would like to thank Dr Reinhardt Schink for his inspiring ideas, valuable contributions and critical comments on an earlier version of this article.

making situations. My argument briefly boils down to seeing personal faith and related spirituality as a valuable resource that would aid in the role of leadership. Those who do not deal with religious questions merely cognitively, scientifically or intellectually, but practise faith and spirituality, inevitably encounter “The Uncontrollability of the World” (Rosa, 2020).This is deeply inherent in faith. Those who have been able to practice this repeatedly within the course of their spiritual journey are better suited for current organizational leadership challenges than those who primarily take the side of economic rationality in decision-making.

Gümüsay (2020) has shown that there is a research gap in elaborating the particular meaning of religion in the context of multiple institutional logics that organizations face. This article aims to address this existing research gap and to contribute to showing what significance Christian spirituality can have in the field of leadership.

The methodology used is based on a qualitative analysis of important sources from the field of systemic organizational and management research and is complemented by selected theological contributions. A quantitative study has not yet been carried out, but could be the next step in the research process in order to empirically validate the literature-based hypotheses used here. However, this step has yet to be taken. In this sense, the present text follows a hypothesis-generating method.

2. ECONOMIC RATIONALITY AND ITS LIMITATIONS

What exactly does economic rationality mean? Against the background of industrial mass production in America, Frederick W. Taylor (Bonazzi, 2014, 25) made several proposals regarding so-called scientific management and founded the management and administrative sciences. In Germany and other countries, the first business schools were founded to train managers and educate them on good management tools. If one asks about the theoretical core of these economic approaches, two paradigms guide the action. First, business administration assumes that organizations are amenable to rational control and design; therefore, it asks how the conditions will be arranged and how the available means will be used to achieve a given goal that is predetermined from the outside. Thus, in regards to scientific theory, business administration is part of a tradition determined by causality, as it asks how the means will be used to achieve the goal.

Secondly, in the paradigm of rational organizational design, business administrators assume that it is not exclusively a matter of achieving goals but that the available production factors will be combined in order to generate the greatest possible profit. In this respect, it is in the tradition of the (neo-) classical economic theory, according to which individual utility maximisation (operational profit maximisation) at the system level leads to an increase in overall economic welfare. In short, the rationality of objectives and profit maximisation could be identified as dominant theoretical figures in business administration, which accordingly also influence its methods and instruments. From the perspective of the humanities and other social sciences, all kinds of objections can be raised concerning these theoretical assumptions of economics. In the following sections a selection of these arguments are outlined and some blind spots in classical economic thinking are pointed out.

Like any other science, business administration also has its blind spots. Such a meta-discourse will be discussed concerning aspects of the claimed normative independence or freedom from values of business administration, as well as the elements of economic rationality, causality and totality.

In practice, the incorrect idea has prevailed that business administration is like an exact science, comparable to the study of chemistry or mathematics. However, it’s argued that business administration barely reflects its normative blind-spots. It makes supposedly value-free statements but does not convey what these statements do and under what assumptions and conditions they have come about. My teacher, Ekkehard Kappler, used to say, ‘Numbers are made, and then

they have power'. However, who still talks about the contextual conditions of their creation? A business administration that exhausts itself in optimising the achievement of operational goals on an instrumental-technical level without addressing how these goals come about runs the risk of only acknowledging a single part of a larger whole. Reflecting on the contextual conditions of business management seems to be an important prerequisite for its insights to achieve certain connectivity in organizations in which there is awareness that there are other forms of interpreting the world beyond economic rationality (e.g., medical, ethical, social). Such a thematisation of the business contexts leads to, for example, questions about the micro-political power relations in the organization: which stakeholders have specific information needs? Who is entitled to see their information needs being met? Where are they looking? What are suitable indicators of success are used for monitoring the achievement of goals? What exactly can be expressed in figures, and what is not amenable to quantification? How are deviations dealt with? (Kappler, 2006) Suppose that the business administration reflected that applying its methods and instruments is already understood as an intervention that that does not remain without consequences for organizational events. It would then address communication problems much more strongly and would not insist so much on delivering value-neutral facts; rather, it would see its contribution in initiating reflected communication about these facts in the organization. In short, the business theory is not value-free, and neither is practice. Therefore, managers cannot and should not escape these value questions, and the question arises as to how they can increase their sensitivity to such value questions.

Hardly any other model is as closely linked to the idea of economic rationality as the economic, behavioural model of homo economicus (cf. Kirchgässner, 1991). This concept claims to explain people's individual decision-making behaviour and is based on two assumptions:1) people behave rationally in decision-making situations (assumption of rationality), 2) people pursue their individual self-interests (i.e., they maximise their benefit) (ibid. p. 45 ff.). The model has been extensively deconstructed and critically discussed in the social sciences and humanities (cf., e.g., Haller, 2012; Kirchgässner, 1991), and so we can avoid repeating all the critical objections. The two main counter-arguments state that people demonstrably act irrationally (or altruistically) and rarely have complete information regarding their alternative actions. It is true that the economic sciences have taken up many of these arguments and, for example, have included the existence of normative rules as institutional limitations of a decision situation in the theory design (cf. Powell/DiMaggio, 1991). However, this has done little to change the fundamental assumptions of the economic, behavioural model, namely the consideration that optimal decisions could ultimately be calculated. Even if decisions are made in the context of individual preferences, and even if they can only be made under certain restrictions (including limited information), it is a decision that optimises one's own utility (i.e., the central assumption) (Nida-Rümelin, 2011, 38). It is precisely this narrow view of making rational decisions solely based on whether they increase one's own benefit, optimise personal interests and are individually advantageous that makes the model seem somewhat easy to understand, but at the same time also very oversimplified. In fact, there are also other good reasons for making a certain decision in this way and not in another (that is, social, moral, medical, etc.). If one were to condense them all into the concept of economic rationality, it would show that one has only a very limited theory of rationality. However, this is what one could reproach business administration with to this day.

Business administration also assumes that the available means (resources, production factors) are to be used to achieve the specified goals in the best possible way (i.e., with the optimal use of resources), and that the conditions can be shaped in a goal-oriented manner. In this context, leadership in organizations has the task of controlling and ensuring that all resources are used correctly. It assumes that the reality of businesses is fundamentally subject to the causal principle to achieve this. Max Weber has already pointed to the causal differences between ends and means for the rationalisation process of modern society, which contributes to immense progress in science, technology and organizations. In his analysis of rationalisation, he was fascinated by the fact that the means and ends could be causally linked and that real conditions could be im-

proved as a result (cf. Jung, 2008, 72 ff.). Particularly in regard to the natural sciences and engineering, we are used to causal relationships having an effect and being made useful for an intentional influence on the world. Although business administration is repeatedly brought close to these supposedly exact sciences, it is questionable whether the reality of its subject area can be adequately described with an understanding that emphasises causality. In fact, companies are organised social systems for which it is true that the whole is more than the sum of the individual parts (i.e., we are dealing with phenomena of emergence). This means that due to the interaction of the individual, organizational elements, special characteristics and structures emerge that cannot be directly influenced from the outside (e.g., corporate culture). Heinz von Foerster proposed the distinction between a trivial and a non-trivial machine (cf. Foerster, 1997, 32 ff.), pointing out that social phenomena, including organised social systems, differ from simple, technical or causal machines. In contrast, so-called non-trivial machines are characterised by their internal states changing continuously on the basis of previous operations and how their outputs simultaneously represent the inputs of new operations. An input once given will no longer produce the same output, as the operation of the machine at time $t_{(n)}$ depends on the operations of its past ($t_{(n-1,2,3...)}$) (Jung, 2008, 74; cf. also Foerster, 1997, 39). In this sense, organised social systems are non-trivial machines. They are neither simple and causally constructed in the sense of Max Weber's rationality of purpose, nor do they behave so randomly in their operations that they can be described statistically (Baecker 2005, p. 14 with reference to Warren Weaver's 'Science and Complexity' from 1948). What is prudent to observe here is that business studies do not have an eye for the stubbornness, non-observability or irrationalities that exist in organizations. In fact, within organizations we are always dealing with social arrangements that cannot be described with the conceptual tools of business administration because they are completely unpredictable and indeterminate. In its focus on the description of objective entities, business administration is blind to the kind of realities that are communicatively produced in social processes and in which the given, real and objective appears and the potential, imaginary and unreal do not (cf. Rüegg-Stürm, 2001, 21).

The objections listed here amount to rejecting the absolutisation of business descriptions and instead seeing economic rationality for what it is: merely one possible form of describing the world in the diverse concert of many other rationalities. Totality means that business administration tends to foster the social process of economisation through its contributions. This consists of declaring the economic principle, according to which costs and benefits are carefully weighed against each other to be a universal approach to human decision-making (see Sandel 2012, 63 f. critically). Probably the most famous advocate of such a totality of economic thinking, according to the benefit calculus, should be applied to economic decisions and social, religious or political ones is the American Nobel Prize winner in economics, Gary S. Becker (Becker, 1982, 7). Becker's radical economic approach, in which the principle of utility is extended to practically all areas of life, has been widely disseminated (and criticised) in economic theory and many practical areas of human coexistence. Sometimes the approach has led to accelerating the process of societal economisation. With that being said, a description of social and organizational decision-making situations that narrows itself down to economic or business models always delegitimizes alternative explanatory approaches.

In my opinion, a critical examination of the blind spots of business administration concerning its conceptual foundations is an important prerequisite for giving business administration methods and instruments the appropriate status in organizations that they can undoubtedly have. This is the only way to see competing possibilities for understanding and interpreting the world alongside economic rationality, and leaders must learn to better understand these multiple concepts, as theorised in the following section.

3. ORGANIZATIONS AND MULTIPLE INSTITUTIONAL LOGICS

The question of how society and organizations are connected has been theorised by organizational sociology (with a view to society) and by sociology (with a view to a social theory of the

organization) (cf. Tacke/Drepper, 2018 and Lieckweg/Wehrsig, 2001). In sociological organization theory, neo-institutionalism, in particular, has dealt with this question and found out that the organization's modes of operation cannot be detached from the norms and expectations of its institutional environment. To understand organizations, one must observe the institutional world in which they are embedded. This is because the behaviour of organizations cannot be explained based on the criteria of efficiency but rather must be explained by taking into account the diffusion of institutionalised patterns of behaviour (Besio, 2015,159; see also the references thereto Meyer/Rowan, 1977; DiMaggio/Powell 1983 and Scott 2001). If, for example, an organization is embedded in an institutional environment in which the aim is to provide the religious system with services, as is the case with churches, then this also affects its internal mode of operation. This cannot then be aligned solely to criteria and procedures that cannot claim any validity in this environment. Such organizations then sometimes find it difficult to measure all internal decisions by whether they are profitable. Instead, they must, for example, be able to be theologically legitimised at the same time. The religious system is then used as a reference system. It is not surprising that this approach was criticised by the representatives of the economic behaviour model. For the neo-institutionalists, decisions are made by actors who align them with external environmental requirements, which are sometimes also politically and/or morally coded. This discussion will not be repeated here, but it should be pointed out that the coupling of organization and society (i.e., of internal operational decision-making reality and the external demands from the social environment) is of particular importance.

In organizational science, this line of thought has gained acceptance in recent years and dictates that organizational decisions must be aligned with several institutional environments at once. Against the background of growing societal pluralisation and differentiation, they have to find ways to deal with this increase in complexity. In this context, concepts regarding pluralistic organization (Denis/Langley/Rouleau, 2007, 179 f.) or the hybrid organization (Brandsen/Karré, 2011) have entered organizational research. The idea that these organizations must simultaneously process multiple rationalities in their decision-making processes is central. Therefore, Kuno Schedler also speaks of multi-rational organizations and multi-rational management (Schedler, 2012, 366) when he traces the theoretical historical development this article refers to here. According to Schedler, institutionalised expectations of an organization lead to its hybridisation so that it becomes a pluralistic organization in the long run, something that has become more and more evident in practice, making the question of managing pluralistic organizations highly relevant. (ibid.)

The point is that leadership needs to be reconceptualised within these hybrid organizations, including social welfare organizations, churches, NGOs, etc. Suppose one understands such organizations as multi-rational contexts, structurally coupled with several social environments (social aid, economy, health, religion, etc.). In that case, a specific understanding of leadership in the context of the resulting multiple decision-making rationalities is needed.

However, the argument of the hybrid organization is to be sharpened even further. Indeed, even normal commercial organizations such as companies or banks are increasingly dealing with phenomena of multi-referentiality if one takes a closer look at the various stakeholder interests from their internal environment.

As can be seen in the context of current discourses on leadership and organization, categories are increasingly being addressed beyond the narrow understanding of economic rationality. More and more commercial organizations are also being observed for their potential to serve the individual needs of their members beyond their original mission. Laloux (2014) and Scharmer (2014), for example, prominently argue that, under the conditions of hypermodernity, organizations are increasingly being confronted with expectations on the part of their members that are aimed at categories such as the creation of meaning and personal well-being. Laloux shows that employees increasingly yearn for a radically different way of working together in organizations. As a re-

sult, he counters the modern performance-oriented paradigm with a postmodern pluralistic paradigm. This new paradigm is very aware of the shadows its modern counterpart casts on people and society: the materialistic obsession, social injustice and loss of community. On the other hand, the postmodern pluralist worldview would have a high sensitivity to people's feelings, according to Laloux. In the perspective of this paradigm, an inspiring sense orientation would be at the centre of all (also organizational) action. What is special about this view is that organizations are challenged enormously by it. In addition to the economic fulfilment of their original purpose, they are also exposed to the individual sense-making expectations of their members. The human relations movement has always pushed for the reintroduction of human needs in scientific management. However, this was always linked to the argument that better working conditions would make employees more productive in the long run. Adding the employees' individual expectations of the creation of meaning becomes part of the organizational purpose if one takes Laloux at his word.

For organizational theory, it is an open question, both empirically and theoretically, whether organizations are in principle overburdened with having to fulfil individual expectations of meaning on the part of their members in addition to fulfilling their purpose. However, these individual expectations go hand in hand with an immense increase in organizational diversity, as it cannot be expected that an inspiring sense of purpose means the same thing for every member of the organization. Therefore, different and often even contradictory world views and value attitudes confront companies with very different perspectives, expectations and demands from both their external and internal environments.

Such a situation would be resolved in a worldview shaped by modernity by searching for an overarching context(Jean-François Lyotard spoke of the ‘grand narrative’) wherein the different points of view could be adequately addressed, the claims weighed and a ‘rational’ decision made. With the loss of faith in ‘grand narratives’, however, the optimism that such situations could be discursively managed at all also dwindled. Postmodernists, and particularly hyper modernists, not only doubt that an overarching context exists, they also do not believe that employees only have to talk to each other long enough to understand each other and reach a majority agreement. Therefore, organizations must increasingly develop the ability to deal with diversity, ambiguity and indeterminacy.

Concerning the organizational theory, it was previously considered a settled matter that the appropriate response to ambiguous decision-making situations is hierarchy, the advantages of which should not be underestimated too quickly. After all, there have always been different ‘world views’ when, for example, marketing and controlling, research and development or sales have looked at a problem from very diverse perspectives. It has always been the case that hierarchy was used to solve decision-making problems (e.g., regarding the use of scarce resources), and the task of leadership was to solve existing conflicts from a higher perspective. What is new is that the different contexts are splitting up more and more and that different traditions and points of view exist even within one department. The phenomenon of ambiguity is becoming radicalised and the ‘translation work’ is becoming more and more challenging - or even impossible - especially when external stakeholders are also involved. It is becoming clearer that no internally consistent goal hierarchy system maximises all dimensions so that the overall system is at its optimum point.

Consequently, we are faced with a dilemma: On the one hand, it must be stated that there is no longer a coherent overarching context of meaning for organizations that is capable of resolving the differences in interpretation and the resulting conflicts. On the other hand, the demands on organizations with regard to their ability to create meaning have increased enormously: organizations are supposed to orient themselves to values such as ‘fairness, equality, harmony, community, cooperation and consensus’. Thus, in addition to their actual purpose, companies must increasingly fulfil demands for the social and individual creation of meaning for their members and

their external environment. This goes far beyond the classic function of fulfilling a purpose and requires a new approach to leadership that is able to think in terms of meaning without being able to meet the associated expectations fully.

All this cannot remain without consequences for leadership and leadership theory, which will be discussed further in the following section of this article. It is argued that a certain kind of religious or spiritual faith can be a training ground for increasing the ambiguity tolerance and ambivalence affinity of leaders.

4. FAITH, BELIEF AND AMBIGUITY

The following section will clarify that a certain form of religious faith and the spirituality associated with can support managers in developing their tolerance of ambiguity, which is necessary for the above-mentioned reasons in coping with organizational challenges. One could accuse of instrumentalizing faith and spirituality for better management, functionalising them to a certain extent. However, this is by no means the intention, as it shouldn't be assumed that becoming spiritual, dealing with Christian mysticism or going on pilgrimage to a monastery will make people become better managers. It is not about the linear causality reduction of a simple if/then scheme. Faith and spirituality are not a means to an end but a value in themselves, and they retain that value quite independently of their contribution to achieving a goal.

The influential Harvard theologian Harvey Cox (2009) proposed a distinction between Faith and Belief in this context to make it explicit that it is about a very specific way of dealing with religious or metaphysical questions. One can have a deep faith but reject certain beliefs that are important to a religious community, and the reverse is also true: one can hold the opinions and beliefs of religion with great passion or even fervour to the end but lose one's actual faith over time. Faith is a process, a kind of life journey that helps us come to terms with the ultimate questions behind the questions. Albert Einstein put it in the following way: 'To sense that behind anything that can be experienced there is something that our minds cannot grasp, whose beauty and sublimity reaches us only indirectly: this is religiousness. In this sense, and in this sense only, I am a devoutly religious man'. (Cox, 2009, 21, quoted according to Walter Isaacson) The first Christians were called 'people on the new way'. To have faith is to be on the way, which is the opposite of a creed that tries to fix matters in a static manner and where immovable foundations are to be preserved. So when this article speaks here of religious faith and a corresponding spirituality, it doesn't so in a denominational sense or in the form of a particular creed, but in the sense of faith (in accordance with how Harvey Cox describes and historically reconstructs it). This contribution refers to the Christian faith because the authors' biography is rooted in this narrative community. However, similar forms of faith can be undoubtedly found in other religious traditions. It can be suspected that for all religions, in one way or another, the distinction between faith and belief can be instructive and revealing.

In this sense, the nature of Christian spirituality can be understood as letting go of one's own attempts at power and control. The 'incarnation of God' (the Christian term) is to be interpreted in this perspective as a letting go of God, who becomes a man and comes into the world as a child in a stable and is willing to give up all comforts. He gave up control and became enormously dependent as a child. Such a letting go must be practised, as it contradicts our (at least Western European and North American) cultural tradition of 'taking things in hand', shaping them and leading them to success - in other words, managing them. Christian spirituality knows that there is something greater than one's abilities, concerns, ambitions, goals, etc. For example, many organizational developers (with great openness to spirituality) are better able than hard-nosed managers in using large group methods such as Open Space, which relinquishes control and lets the group do what happens with amazing results.

When leaders practise Christian spirituality, they inevitably have to come to terms with their limitations and powerlessness. 'Becoming flesh' means turning away from inadmissible idealisation

International Journal of Business Research Management (IJBRM)
ISSN: 2180-2165, https://www.cscjournals.org/journals/IJBRM/description.php

and perfection. ‘Not idealism, but embodiment, not abstract-eternal ideas, but rather the here and now, not withdrawal from the material, but becoming flesh is the task of Christian spirituality’. (Zulehner, 2004, 33, own translation) Those who engage in such an incarnational perspective in their faith or spiritual practices become more capable of coming to terms with their power to act and their powerlessness. In other words, for leaders it is then a matter of putting the abstractness of the targets in tension with the concrete empirical conditions of action in their organization. In this sense, spirituality would be the ‘realisation of faith under the concrete conditions of life’. (Zulehner, 2004, 39, own translation) Further, spiritually-experienced leaders would be challenged by this to conceptualise the concrete conditions of life as an object to be worked on and changed in favour of growth, optimisation or goal achievement. They are realities that we sometimes have to endure and accept in regards to powerlessness.

My thesis is that leaders who practise Christian spirituality become more capable of enduring ambiguous, vague and contradictory situations, as well as acting more appropriately throughout such scenarios. Those prepared to deal with their powerlessness are less likely to succumb to the temptation of managerial hubris. Those who understand their powerlessness will also be able to deal more calmly with the limits of others. Those who practise letting go are not condemned to hold on to everything, to grasp and hoard. Even one's own opinion does not have to be pushed through at all costs against all objections. In short, Christian spirituality can help managers in the context of established organizational logic toward action and expand their repertoire of world interpretations, thus increasing their ability to recognise that the world is much more colourful, complex, ambiguous and unavailable than is generally assumed in management.

In his essay on the unification of the world, the Islamic scholar Thomas Bauer points out that religion (not only Christian religion and spirituality) is very well suited to increasing ambiguity capacity, if one discounts its fundamentalist distortions. The first reason is, as Bauer observes, based on the need to accept transcendence as such. Religion is based on the belief in something that goes beyond, literally transcends, what is rationally knowable; the belief in something greater and different from us. Because this is so, it cannot be completely interpreted; therefore, no matter how hard the most intelligent theologians and religious scholars try to conceptualise the transcendent, there always remains a residue of vagueness and indeterminacy(in other words, ambiguity). (Bauer, 2018: 34) Transcendence cannot be fully interpreted, as it would not be transcendent if it did not exceed the measure of human reason.

In a simplistic view of the great book-religions such as Judaism, Christianity and Islam, the apparent counterargument used is that the sacred texts provide information on how certain concepts and religious ideas are to be grasped (Belief). However, this overlooks the fact that the understanding of the sacred texts is based on a human, situational context. An infinite and eternal God reveals Himself/Herself in a finite and temporally bound world, and this revelation is recognised (or misrecognised) and interpreted through human contexts. Ambiguity is thus a constitutive feature of a Christian spirituality that remains so dependent on a hermeneutic and has several sources (including the object of cognition and the contextuality of human cognition). ‘All of these texts show precisely that characteristic inherent in all complex texts: ambiguity. Since most of them are rather complex texts, which also speak about a particularly ambiguous field such as religion and faith, they even show a particularly high degree of ambiguity, comparable at best with literary texts. In the case of these texts, too, the way they are dealt with will therefore depend very much on how tolerant of ambiguity the readers and listeners of these texts are’. (Bauer, 2018: 35, own translation) Therefore, there is a particularly large degree of indeterminacy involved in dealing with religion, and spiritual people are no strangers to this. However, they do not find ambiguity frightening, as it is essential to such spirituality. Transcendence opens up for them a serenity in penultimate earthly things, as well as a calm reflection on their limitations. This perspective changes both their actions in everyday leadership and their view of the empirical conditions of action in this world, their lives and their relationships with fellow human beings.

5. FAITH-BASED LEADERSHIP IN THE CONTEXT OF AMBIGUITY

Let us conclude: one might think that almost everything has been said about leadership in science; however, it is noticeable that a large part of the leadership approaches being offered belong to how-to literature and are strongly normative. Many concepts are more like a recipe and try to describe more or less plausibly what one should do so that it tastes like leadership. Most approaches elaborate on how one should lead but not what constitutes leadership's social phenomenon (cf. Muster et al., 2020, 285). Mostly, the texts suggest that leaders can autonomously decide how they want to lead and thus, to a certain extent, directly control or strongly influence the conditions for success and the results of good leadership. The common and often normatively driven leadership styles such as democratic leadership (Gastil, 1994), ethical leadership (Brown & Treviño, 2006), servant leadership (Greenleaf, 1998), transformational leadership (Bass, 1999), transactional leadership (Sarros & Santora, 2001), lateral leadership (Kühl, 2017), etc. are good examples of this claim that leaders are always able to freely choose their own type of leadership independently of those they lead. But that is an inadequate simplification. Much more appropriate, therefore, is the approach of situational leadership (Hersey, Blanchard & Natemeyer, 1979), whereby it must be emphasised that the situation itself pre-structures which leadership impulses are necessary, but also possible.

One is again reminded of Heinz von Foerster's metaphor of the trivial machine (Foerster, 1997, 32 ff.) when it is assumed that managers can vary their leadership style according to the situation and thus come a little closer to the goals of the organization. Regarding management, the famous researcher Henry Mintzberg (2010, 65) stated that extensive lists of characteristics are usually compiled. In order to be successful managers are expected to just apply these lists. He pointed out, that this trivialises the real problem. The problem with this idea is that people would have to become true superheroes. Additionally, another problem is that one learns little about the social phenomenon of leadership because it is broken down into its fundamental parts in the lists, leading people to only focus on certain aspects in particular.

This paper follows a sociological concept of leadership and, following Dirk Baecker (cf. Baecker, 2012), conceptualise leadership primarily as a social communication event in which the actors involved mutually relate to each other and thus jointly produce how leadership is or is not done (cf. Baecker, 2012). Against this background, it is essential to distinguish the concept of leadership from that of hierarchy and the formal expectations that an organization addresses to some of its members. Indeed, not all who should lead (leaders, for example) actually lead, and not all who lead are formally expected to do so (because they do not hold the hierarchical position). The hierarchical assignment of a leadership role does not automatically mean that leadership takes place. Here, the approach of Judith Muster, Stefanie Büchner, Thomas Hoebel and Tabea Koepp is followed (Muster et al. 2020, p. 285), who stated: ‘Leadership is conceived as situationally successful intervention in critical moments, which is realised in a sequence of three events. The trigger event is a social situation in which a critical moment arises that makes leadership necessary in the first place (I). This is followed by a communicatively raised leadership claim that mobilises the means of influence (II). The emergence of followership (III) shows whether leadership has taken place’. (Muster et al., 2020, 285, own translation) Within these sequences (cf. Aljets/Hoebel, 2017), it depends first of all on whether and by whom a critical moment is observed. It can happen that a leader (because he or she is socialised in business administration, for example) does not observe specific challenges and therefore does not produce any leadership impulses, which sometimes leads to a disappointment of expectations on the part of the other actors. While some perceive a critical moment that leads to uncertainty, others lull themselves into security and doubt whether leadership is needed at all in a given situation. My argument is that leadership is a continuous process in which it must be negotiated and reflected again and again, in a very context-specific way, what is observed by whom, which organizational uncertainty zones arise and what expectations the actors involved have of each other. What is assessed as good and appropriate leadership is in the eye of the participants. Someone can make a communicative claim to leadership but then let others go nowhere and offer no allegiance. Conversely, the small-

est interventions (by whomever) can sometimes be enough to defuse a critical moment and thus resolve uncertainty. Followership then consists merely of adopting a particular interpretation of a situation offered by another. What is at stake here is to show that 'leadership is conditional: it depends on critical moments; on the fact that a claim to leadership is made and allegiance arises. One event of the sequential three-step of leadership is not enough to call an active leadership. A leadership claim without followership and a critical moment is initially just that: a claim, not leadership. In addition, the concept developed here points out that there is no continual guarantee of leadership: in other situations, others may successfully lead. Hierarchy also does not guarantee leadership in this sense. Just as with the formation of informal leadership roles, it merely endows leadership claims with a higher probability of acceptance' (Muster et al., 2020, 298, own translation).

Most business management concepts have difficulty with the concept of leadership presented here because it becomes clear that leadership can also fail (Baecker, 2003). Still, it remains unclear who can be blamed for this failure. It is precisely at the two levels of observing critical moments and mobilising means of influence to assert a claim to leadership that all kinds of contradictions and conflicts regularly arise in hybrid organizations. The different functional logics of the institutional environments and the diverse stakeholder interests leads to the actors involved making very different observations about what can be understood as a critical moment. The business administration methods and instruments measure the world differently than the methods of other reference systems (e.g., social work, theology, medicine). Depending on the instrumental lens through which the world is viewed, one sees different challenges and classifies moments as critical in different ways. This then regularly results in contradictory interpretations of the phenomena occurring in practice, leading to considerable organizational conflicts.

The fact that conflicts can arise because different actors observe the world differently is not new. However, for the question dealt with here, it becomes apparent that leadership has a special (and perhaps also new) task, namely to handle paradoxical and contradictory organizational conditions without immediately taking a particular side or resolving conflicts using hierarchy. Multi-rationality and the resulting contradictions are in principle irresolvable; therefore, conflicts that arise cannot be solved once and for all but must be continuously 'handled'.

Accordingly, leadership can be compared to a juggler who has to keep different perspectives and goals 'in the air' simultaneously. Comparable to a tightrope walker who oscillates back and forth between one side and the other, leadership must not permanently take the side of only one rationality. Otherwise, hybrid organizations run the risk of not paying enough attention to the central expectations of their institutional environments and thus endangering their existence in the long run. Leadership understood in this way therefore no longer has the task of bringing about unambiguous decision-making situations (for example, through the sole interpretative authority of the economists, the lawyers, the theologians or any other experts).It must instead take into account that this unambiguity cannot exist in principle. One has handle several institutional environments at the same time and this is one of the conditions for survival. It is a matter of interpreting the contradictory conditions that arise from this as the normal organizational case. In other words, leadership in organizations requires a high degree of ambivalence and tolerance of ambiguity. (cf. Bauer 2018) This means that leaders must have the competence to tolerate uncertain, ambiguous and contradictory ways of acting and create conditions that provide the actors involved with forms of negotiation to come to a decision in a reasonably productive way without attaching themselves one-sidedly to only one rationality.

Within organizational development (and thus also in the context of a central part of business management methodology), the discourses on holocracy and agile organization can be understood as an attempt to appreciate the existing diversity of perspectives, organizational ambiguity and vagueness, not as a means to dissolve them using hierarchy. (Jung/Schink, 2019, 178) It is by no means easy for leaders - no matter how professionally they are socialised - to become

capable of ambivalence and tolerant of ambiguity. The need to mediate between different rationalities requires a high degree of perceptual competence, communication skills and the ability to engage in dialogue in order to be able to register the critical moments in an organization at all in order to assert one's claim to leadership in a way that can be connected and then organise followership in this way. Those who rely on business methods and instruments run the risk of not asserting their leadership claims with those who have a different decision-making rationale due to a different institutional environment. Conversely, those who never rely on business management instruments do not have the necessary 'sensory perception' to receive the signals from the institutional environment of the economy, which are equally indispensable for organizational survival.

Leaders who have learned in the course of their religious socialisation that truth is always in need of interpretation in a hermeneutic process often find this capacity for ambivalence easier. Those who have dealt with questions of mysticism or hermeneutics on their spiritual journey are more likely to remain open to the fact that decision alternatives cannot always be calculated rationally or economically, finding that they stand side by side on an equal footing. Heinz von Foerster has pointed out that it is precisely in these undecidable aspects where one can only speak of a decision in the true sense of the word. (Foerster, 1993, 73)

Following Kuno Schedler, this article concludes by pointing out (cf. Schedler, 2012, 369 f.) that leaders have four possible strategies for dealing with different rationalities. They choose from these four strategies depending on whether they find a more unconscious or a conscious approach to multi-rationality and whether the leaders adhere to mono-rationality or not. In this way, four strategies for dealing emerge: avoidance, isolation, tolerance and competence, as the following cross-tabulation shows:

	monorational/ centristic	multirational/ relativistic
conscious perception	**Isolation** Search for monorational context	**Competence** Empowerment for multirational action
unconscious perception	**Avoidance** Implicit dominance of one rationality	**Tolerance** Intuitive mediation between rationalities

TABLE 1: Practices in dealing with multiple rationalities (Schedler, 2012, 370, own translation).

The *avoidance strategy* of leadership arises because leaders are not aware of the phenomenon of multi-rationality and they cling to dominant decision-making rationality (belief). For people socialised in business management, people from less rationalistic thought traditions (such as social workers or theologians) often seem too enthusiastic and too socially romantic in their proposals. Conversely, people without business socialisation accuse 'those up there' of not being interested in people's real problems, instead only accepting the 'cold world of numbers'. Conflicts and organizational decision blockades are pre-programmed, which usually leads to a very unproductive 'ping-pong game' between the different interests and world views.

The *isolation strategy* of leadership arises when leaders may understand multi-rationality and are aware that others have an alternate worldview because they look at the world differently. However, they also cling to their dominant decision-making rationality because the permanent con-

International Journal of Business Research Management (IJBRM)
ISSN: 2180-2165, https://www.cscjournals.org/journals/IJBRM/description.php

frontation with other institutional environments is too exhausting for them. The dance on the tightrope seems like a Sisyphean task, and they often choose contexts in which the different rationalities can be isolated. Problems are sometimes broken down into subtasks: for example, business management tools are used to examine financial viability, while social workers examine pedagogical necessity. Of course, this does not resolve the contradiction, but the decision is postponed or the problem is delegated upwards in the hierarchy. Ultimately, leadership is avoided when, in a hybrid organization, an attempt is made to evade multi-rationality by retreating to a specialised area. In organizations, the formation of departments can be interpreted as an attempt to manage different rationalities. So-called dual heads in social institutions, where there is a commercial and a pedagogical or theological director, would also be an organizational response that first tries to deal with multi-rationality by isolating areas of responsibility – at the latest in the board, there must then be a mediation of these different world views. At that point, leadership becomes an art of dealing with ambiguity.

The *tolerance strategy* of leadership arises because leaders intuitively know how to mediate between the different positions without being aware of the underlying causes of multi-rationality. These are people who have a good knowledge of human nature and who, because of their empathic perceptiveness, can see the world through the eyes of others. When they claim leadership, they build trust and mobilise arguments and perspectives that make it easy for others to follow.

Ideally, leaders apply a competence strategy. This emerges when leaders reflect on the phenomenon of multi-rationality and consciously avoid clinging to their dominant rationalities, instead becoming willing and able to learn to oscillate skilfully between different world views. Leaders then live with contradictions and are sensitive to the resulting conflicts; see through the danger of evasive movements (especially avoidance and isolation) and can integrate the different world views productively by using tensions as a resource to energise change processes. ‘Not the merging of the different rationalities or the adoption of one rationality by the others, but the retention of difference with the simultaneous will of a search for consensus is the strategy to be chosen’ (Schedler, 2012, 372). The St. Gallen management researcher Johannes Rüegg-Stürm explicitly refers to the willingness of competent managers to experiment in dealing with multi-rationality. ‘Multi-rational understanding begins with the admission of the existence of different rationalities of equal value and is based on a mutually positive recognition of this difference. Multi-rational management requires the willingness to actively get to know and explore different rationalities in a dialogue process without the participants having to make the respective other rationalities their own. Multi-rational management requires the willingness to act experimentally and carry out ‘pilot projects’ whose concrete realisation opens up new perspectives. (Rüegg-Stürm, 2011, 13, quoted in Schedler 2012, 372, own translation)

We shall conclude by turning back to our starting point: organizations are being increasingly confronted with a multitude of competing demands resulting from different institutional environments as well as from the different interests of their internal stakeholders. This phenomenon of multi-rationality or multi-referentiality leads to all kinds of ambiguous and contradictory decision-making situations that cannot be resolved by dominantly favouring linear-causal methods of economics. Rather, managers need the dialogical ability to mediate between different worldviews and interpretations, moderating between different perspectives. It could be shown that corresponding resources and competencies for such moderation can be found in the field of religious faith and spirituality; however, a prerequisite for this is not to misunderstand faith as a rigid system of categories (belief) but as a hermeneutic process of truth-seeking to discover life-serving principles behind the facts.

In this sense, faith-based leadership would be well placed to deal with the organizational phenomena of ambiguity and contradiction, as well as the conflicts resulting from competing forms, in order to interpret our world.

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