Leadership as Idolatry

The Case of Stalinism and Beyond

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Abstract

This study explores how an extended view of idolatry can be used to analyze leadership in organizations. Beginning with the theological anthropology of James K. Smith, it develops a model of idolatry and then moves on to explore the cases of Stalinism and Enron. The ultimate concern promoted by personality cults in these cases, it is not only the leader but also the organization itself and a narrative that give the organization and its leaders a grandiose self-identity. Moreover, the study suggests that organizational cultures and organizational rituals can slide into idolatry, even if this is not fully intended. The key mechanisms here are rituals of charismatic self-seduction and psychological control, forming a totalitarian culture. By combining charismatic leadership theory and critical realism, this study also suggests that idolatry can emerge from below, although individual reflexivity can also resist idolatrous leadership. Finally, when truth is exchanged for grandiose self-images, it leads to violations of human dignity. The study identifies three questions that could help leaders to prevent themselves from slipping into idolatry. It also argues that churches could be resources for organizational leaders in terms of being communities of counter-formation, mutual discernment and missional empowerment.
Keywords: Worship, Idolatry, Organizational culture, charismatic leadership, Stalinism, theology of workplace

Introduction: The purpose and methods of this study

Theologians should serve the whole church, including Christian leaders who work in secular organizations. For this reason, it is beneficial that the semi-religious leadership literature has become increasingly popular during the last few decades (for a review, see Banks et al., 2016). Religious wisdom can contribute to human flourishing. However, such a practical theology is also in danger of becoming too anthropocentric and too uncritical in the sense that it

buys into an agenda of self-realization and turns God into a life coach without asking crucial, critical questions. In this article, I offer a complementary critical perspective, arguing that Christian leaders should reflect on the relationship between leadership and idolatry.

The main questions that are explored are as follows: *Can organizational leadership be an idolatrous practice, and if so, what are the key criteria of idolatrous leadership*? I also reflect on how practitioners and researchers can use these criteria to understand organizational leadership and become better analysts and practitioners. I also discuss how churches can contribute to this process of formation and discernment. The study begins by exploring idolatry from a constructive theological perspective and sketching a model of organizational analysis. In the next section, I enter into dialogue with social scientific case studies of personality cults to develop and refine the model.[1] I have chosen two cases, one from politics and one from business, to identify patterns beyond a single domain. I also use critical realist sociology for an analytical perspective. This type of sociology offers a useful and necessary perspective on the relations among social structures, cultures and agency.[2]

A theological model of worship and organizational analyses

The notions of worship and idolatry are central to the Judeo-Christian tradition. The Jewish "Shema" reads,

> Hear, O Israel: The Lord our God, the Lord is one.[a] Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength (Deutr. 6:4-5)

Accordingly, institutions of worship were at the center of Israel's social life, and worship of other gods was strictly forbidden (Exodus 20:3). Moreover, correct worship should manifest in moral relationships beyond the sanctuary. In this manner, Israel was called to be a social model to the world. In the New Testament, Jesus both confirms and renews this social vison, calling people to worship God and love their neighbors (Matt 6:9-33; 22:37-39).

One could ask whether a model that places worship at the center of social life is an anachronism without relevance for late modern organizations beyond the church. At least three objections might be raised. First, most late modern organizations can be regarded as secular in the sense that they work within what Charles Taylor called an immanent framework

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1 Following Flyvbjergs (2001) model of "phronetic science", I use case studies to explore moral problems.

2 Margaret Archer (2003) proposed a stratified view of social realities in which distinctive properties and powers pertain *sui generis* to both structure and agents. In this model, the structure and agents are inter-related yet analytically distinct entities. The process of agency in relation to structures can be summarized as follows: (1) structural and cultural properties *objectively* shape the situations that agents confront in relation to (2) persons define their priorities of concerns subjectively -- in relation to the natural, practical, and social realms of life; (3) courses of action are produced as people undertake *reflexive deliberations* in inner conversations; and (4) courses of action can reproduce such structures and persons (morphostatis), or they can transform structures and persons (morphogenesis) and thus create a new situation.

(Taylor, 2007). Second, one might argue that forms of worship in the workplace would be oppressive since the workforce could belong to a great variety of religions and life views. Third, one might ask how such a theology could relate to the mainstream of social science that largely works within a paradigm of methodological atheism. These objections must be seriously considered. For this reason, I return to these questions in the last part of this article. How are we to interpret these objections if the absence of worship of a god might indicate that we are worshipping something else? James K. Smith argues that humans are worshipping beings (*homo adorans*). The question is not whether we will love something as ultimate; the question is what we worship. Smith suggests that what we worship might be identified in what we dream of, our "visions of the Kingdom". The often unconscious telos that defines our human journey appears "less than an ideal of what we have ideas about" and more as a vision of the good life that we desire (J. K. A. Smith, 2016). Following Augustine, he also suggests that when the right order of love is disrupted, it leads to chaos and destruction in the "earthly city" (J. K. A. Smith, 2017). Based on these assumption, Smith proposes a lens for analyses of everyday rituals, some of which are more important than others. The rituals that Smith calls *cultural liturgies* (1) are formative for identity; (2) inculcate visions of the good life; and (3) are able to do this so powerfully that they trump other ritual formations in terms of shaping habitual bodily orientation toward *ultimate concern ((*J. K. A. Smith, 2009).

Smith does not promote a Christian withdrawal from the world. It is because Christians are called to be in the world that they should learn to analyze cultural liturgies. What I call the EVI model is a tool for this type of cultural and organizational analyses. The model is indebted to Smith, yet the acronym EVI stands for "extended view of idolatry" and is acquired from the works of Jewish and Christian theologians who understand idolatry in terms of granting ultimate value, loyalty and devotion to something other than God. "Extended" means that anything, not only "deities", can function in this manner. The EVI model can be summarized in three 3 intuitions.

- Idolatry appears through identity-forming "liturgical" rituals that shape habitual orientations toward an ultimate concern that is granted ultimate value, devotion and loyalty.
- Such ultimate concerns might be detected indirectly through visions of the good life and might manifest more as desires, images and passions than as ideas.
- The social consequences of idolatry can be expected to be destructive.

Stalinism as a personality cult

I now use this model to interpret two cases of so-called personality cults to answer my research questions and refine the model. One might argue that a "personality cult" is a politically biased term since it is commonly used by "Western" studies of communism. Nevertheless, it was the Soviet leader Nikita Khrushchev who made the term legendary when he used it to denounce Stalin's abuses of power in a "secret speech" at a Communist Party Congress in 1956 (Rees, 2004,3). Two ethnographic stories provided by Strong and Killingsworth offer interesting insights into how Stalin was perceived by Soviet citizens. They narrate how a young girl remembered her childhood:

> They said there was no God, and I made my God of Stalin. It's funny but let me tell you. If I was sick or something hurt me, then I thought it would go away because Stalin knew. He was just like a God. (quote from Strong & Killingsworth, 2011,407)

More astonishing and perhaps more important is that even those people who were persecuted by Stalin continued to see him as a larger than life paternal figure. In the book *The Education of a True Believer*, Lev Kopelev, a famous author and dissident, described how he felt when in 1941 Stalin assured the Russian people of victory within a half year or a little more:

> ... In my memory, the pain and the horror of 1933 and 1937 had not grown cold. I remembered how. .. [Stalin] had deceived us, how he had lied to us about the past and the present. And nevertheless, I believed him all over again, as did my comrades. I believed him more than at any time in the past because, perhaps, at the moment I first felt a spontaneous, emotional attachment to him. .. This belief and heartfelt devotion could not easily be broken. It was not broken by many years of prisons and camps. (quoted from Strong and Killingsworth, 2011, 408)

The impact of the cult manifested in the days after Stalin's funeral in a way that demonstrates that it was not a unique case. Examining a broader range of historical material, Peter Kenez concluded that even those who had been victims of Stalin's horrific dictatorship were weeping and that the country as a whole "was near mass hysteria" (Kenez, 2006, 186).

How could this happen? David Brandenburger (2005) quite convincingly argued that the cult was carefully manufactured by different, yet competing, party ideologists. In the 1920s, these ideologists became frustrated by most Russians seeming to be too poorly educated to grasp and be grasped by Marxist-Leninist ideology. From 1929[3] onward, they cultivated a tsar-like cult to mobilize loyalty to Stalin. The construction of the personality cult was a combination of at least three elements. First, they played on the Russian tradition of personalizing power; second, they built on their own tradition by institutionalizing and mythologizing Lenin's charismatic power; and finally, they attempted to transfer this charismatic dimension to Lenin's successor by constructing a sort of reverence around Stalin.

This process was undertaken in several ways. First, in Soviet propaganda, Stalin was presented using certain heroic roles and images. He was presented as a friend to humanity, a great thinker, the creator of the people's happiness, the defender of the state, a teacher, the builder of the new world and "the inspirer of his people" (Strong & Killingsworth, 2011,404,407). He was also the best Leninist, a great revolutionary, a victorious civil war fighter, an eminent Marxist theorizer and the builder of socialism. The object of worship was therefore a paternal figure who, at the same time, was the sum of all heroes. Being atheists,

[3] Here I follow Tucker (2001) and (Plamper, 2012); the Lenin cult began at his death in 1924.

Marxist ideologists would insist that Stalin was not divine, yet their propaganda could make claims that might be associated with a sort of omnipresence.[4]

Second, these heroic images were presented and narrated though skillfully made artifacts and narrated in the forms of novels, poetry, music and movies. This presentation might be interpreted as a sort of preaching, but this metaphor is only partially fitting. According to Liu and Soboleva (2004), the cult was an overwhelmingly visual phenomenon tailored to a population with high illiteracy rates. For this reason, one should not overlook the images and posters that manufactured a type of physical omnipresence in a society in which the state played an important role in most spheres of everyday life (Fitzpatrick, 2000).

Third, the cult also performed through more active and participatory rituals of praise. The phenomenon of ovation at party congresses is well known, yet Mary McAuley also observed that Stalin and his subordinates cultivated the Stalin myth by interacting in the same manner as Louis XIV and his court: the leader was thanked and praised at every event, and all successes were attributed to him (McAuley, 1977). These liturgies of praise were also institutionalized on a larger scale. According to Xin Lu and Elena Soboleva (2014), the most important date on the Soviet calendar was the birthday of the leader. At these celebrations, similar to religious festivals, banners of portraits of Stalin, Marx and Lenin were carried like icons.

Stalinism as a horizon narrative and vision of the good life

What was this form of worship about? What was its vision of the kingdom? Brandenburger's study showed that Stalin in the 1930s only reluctantly approved of the cult as a tool to indoctrinate the masses because Stalin was a devoted Marxist-Leninist and historical materialist and was skeptical of views of socialism that overemphasized the role of individuals. Stalin were therefore concerned that biographies about himself would ultimately propagate a socialism that contradicted Lenin's emphasis on collective agency and the role of the party as the key agent in history. In "The Foundations of Leninism", Stalin made it clear that it was the party that was the leader and general staff of the working class (Stalin, 1924).

Although some of Stalin's modesty might have been a form of impression management (Plamper 2012, Ch.4), one should not overlook that Stalin was a genuine Leninist ideologist (Tucker 2001). His reaction to the defeats at the beginning of the Second World War in the early 1940s clearly demonstrates that he still felt a personal responsibility to protect the political visions and strategies that Marx and Lenin had given the world (Montefiore, 2003). Thus, when Stalin killed and oppressed opponents and sacrificed his own son by declining a prisoner exchange,[5] it was not, or at least not only, because of psychological pathology. He did these things to enforce a specific political strategy that he believed would realize a certain vision of a good community. He not only "had a vision"; the vision also had him in the sense that it had captured his identity and formed his desire.

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[4] In the movie "the Fall of Berlin" (1950), General Chuikov says, "Is there any time when Stalin was not with us? "Stalin is "always with us". Stalin was also associated with the sun (see Plamper, 2012).

[5] When his son was captured by the Germans, Stalin rejected a German proposal of a prisoner exchange, refusing to afford his own son special treatment (Montefiore 2003).

Thus, the personality cult must be understood within its narrative framework. I suggest at least three interrelated objects of idolatry in the Stalinist horizon narrative: (1) the leader; (2) the party, understanding itself as the most important organization in this phase of the history of mankind; and (3) the realization of the communist vision of a classless and egalitarian society. It is important to note that the Bolsheviks seldom purged other socialists based on their lack of vision of the end. It was the Leninist notion of the party as the dictatorial agent of the proletariat and the Stalinist doctrine of socialism in one country that led them to ostracize and later to kill Mensheviks and Trotskyists. Thus, rather than focusing only on the utopian vision of the good life, it is important to see the Stalinist story as a vision of the best possible life in the real world of class struggle.

The main problem with Stalinism was not that it defined other world views as false consciousness. The problem was the manner in which it treated people who wanted to pursue other life strategies. Stalinism allowed for only one worldview and its corresponding life strategies to be realized, and it oppressed those who thought otherwise. At this point, I find Hannah Arendt's distinction between autocratic and totalitarian regimes very useful. According to Arendt, autocratic regimes seek only to gain absolute political power and to outlaw opposition, whereas totalitarian regimes seek to dominate every individual in every sphere of life (Arendt, 1973). If Arendt was correct, it follows that lack of freedom of religion and other life views is a key indicator of idolatry at the macro-level of society.

From such a perspective, it is interesting that the early Bolsheviks wanted to promote a type of state atheism but still tolerated other religious beliefs to some degree.[6] Based on the way that the Bolsheviks treated Protestants, one might argue that the Soviet Union of 1920 was significantly less totalitarian[7] than Stalinist society in the 1930s, which worshiped its leader. Obviously, atheism was a sort of state religion in the 1920s, and it is beyond doubt that Russian Orthodox Christians suffered martyrdom throughout the history of the USSR, yet it might be no coincidence that persecutions peaked at the same time as the cult accelerated in the 1930s.[8]

Stalinism as power structure and the reflexivity of human agency

In terms of social structure, most researchers of the "totalitarian school" emphasize a "Stalinism from above", meaning that hierarchal power structure backed up and created culturally plausible structures for the Stalinist story. In my view, this perspective is valid, although it should be somewhat modified considering "revisionist" approaches from the social history school (e.g., Fitzpatrick 2000). Here, critical realism's distinction between culture and structural conditioning and the possibility of reflexive agency have great heuristic value (Archer, 2003).[9] In terms of structural conditioning, it is obvious that the cult of Stalin depended on enormous media resources provided by the party's power in what T. H. Rigby described as a "mono-organizational society" (Rigby 1998).

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6 One of the party's guiding principles (article 13) prescribed a form of tolerance (see Pospielovsky 1987).

7 This is history seen from the perspectives of Baptists and Pentecostals (e.g. Löfstedt 2017).

8 Persecution peaked in 1938 when more than 100000 priests were killed. (Pospielovsky, 1987).

9 See also footnote 3.

In turn, the culture of the cult transformed the structures of the party. These changes included the type of patron-client relationships expected to appear in organizations dominated by charismatic leadership. Roy Medvedev suggested, using theological metaphors, that

> Like every cult, this one transformed the communist party into an "ecclesiastical organization, with sharp distinctions between ordinary people and leader-priests headed by their infallible pope (Medvedev, 1989,362).

According to Fitzpatrick, the patron-client relationship spread to all spheres of life. Artists, intellectuals and workers, all of whom wanted have careers, depended on connections in the party hierarchy (Fitzpatrick 2000, Lu and Soboleva 2014), rendering many forms of abuse of power possible. On Stalin's team, men such as Beria used their position to seduce and, in part, to abuse women (Fitzpatrick, 2015).

Finally, the Stalinist ethos was also backed up by the disciplinary strategies of a police state, which violently persecuted, arrested and killed heretics. It is not flattering for Christianity if Simon Sebag Montefiore was correct when he suggested that Stalin learned this type of discipline as a student at a theological seminary. The seminary in Tiflis

> turned Stalin into an atheist Marxist and taught him exactly the repressive tactics -= 'surveillance, spying, invasion of inner life, violation of feelings', in Stalin's own words -- that he would re-create in his Soviet police state (Montefiore, 2007, loc.1799)

If we combine these imaginaries, an ecclesiastical party, a mono-organizational society and violent intrusions of peoples' inner lives, then we see a horrific vision of a totalitarian society.

It is nevertheless clear that this vision was never fulfilled at the level of individual agency. Although it is also possible to identify a "Stalinism from below" (see below), it is clear that Soviet citizens could resist the Stalinist story. Fitzpatrick observed that in 1937, during the great purges, the census of that year recorded that more than half of the population identified themselves as religious believers, thus rejecting the basic credence of the Soviet worldview (Fitzpatrick 2000, loc.5497). Moreover, despite their sense of emotional ambivalence, political dissidents such as Kopelev continued to criticize the system. Even on Stalin's own team, there were different levels of ambivalence. Khrushchev wrote that he cried sincerely after Stalin's death, yet he was also the first Soviet leader to publicly denounce him. Others like Beria, according to Khrushchev, could not hide their hatred as Stalin was dying, although Beria still kissed Stalin's hand (see Taubman, 2004, ch.10).

It is important to acknowledge that resistance to totalitarianism goes beyond political dissidence in the narrow sense of partisan politics. Most Soviet citizens seem to have accepted their political conditioning, in terms of what Fitzpatrick (2000) metaphorically described as "being conscripted to an army", "enrolled in a boarding school", and dependent on a kind of "soup kitchen". However, Fitzpatrick also showed that Soviet citizens creatively managed this conditioning, attempting to establish interpersonal and personal life projects that exceeded those prescribed by the party. She notes that the interior ministry of the Soviet Union (NKVD) in the late 1920s

> regularly reported and official statements repeated, the ordinary "little man" in Soviet Union who thought only of his own and his family's welfare, was "dissatisfied with Soviet power," although in a somewhat fatalistic and passive manner. (Fitzpatrick 2000, loc.5474)

I suggest that the type of indifference described above might indicate something other than fatalism. Choosing alternative ultimate concerns, even alternative idols, is an important means of resisting the politicization of everything in totalitarian societies. Defiance to idolatry primarily occurs on this level of life politics, when citizens overcome their conditioning and choose other ultimate concerns.

The case of Enron – cult-like leadership in a corporation

Leader worship can also occur in business organizations, as in the case of Enron. The bankruptcy of America's 7th-largest company in 2001 has become a symbol of moral bankruptcy. In a sense, it is also a theological tragedy since its founding leader, Kenneth Lay, was profiled as a Christian (McLean, B., Elkind, P., & Nocera, J. 2013. loc 9902-9906). How could this happen? According to Dennis Tourish and Nahheed Vatcha (2005), the reason was that the organization was led in manners that have striking similarities with leadership in a religious cult.

Tourish and Vatcha suggested that this type of leadership had 4 important dimensions. The first was a cult-like charismatic leadership that performed through management conferences, at which leaders presented themselves in a theatrical manner. Moreover, a myth of Kenneth Lay and Jeff Skiller as revolutionary and innovative leaders was created through hagiographic reports in the business press. They also created the impression that an opulent lifestyle was a sign of successful leadership. For example, Kenneth Lay had Enron pay $7.1 million for a penthouse apartment, which he and his wife converted into a Venetian palace. According to Tourish and Vatcha, these signs of financial success contributed to a sort of personality cult, which made success-hungry employees embrace the value system and vision articulated by their glorious leaders. The leaders gained immense and unchallenged authority, and followers had decreasing confidence in their own judgments.

The second element was what Tourish and Vatcha called a totalizing vision and forms of intellectual stimulation. The company believed that it could move from being the world's leading energy company to become the world's leading company. Employees were told that Enron would not only transform the energy sector but also that the company would change how business was performed for the common good. In the same way that this vision was presented as extraordinary, Enron designed intense recruitment rituals that made people being hired feel like part of a special elite. This is the third element that Tourish and Vatcha identified as crucial. Job candidates had to prove that they could maintain high levels of energy and work intensity over an extensive period:

> After the initial interview, they then attended a second interview on one of three to five "Super Saturdays" that were held at Enron's Houston office. Candidates were interviewed for 50 minutes by eight different interviewers in succession with one 10-minute break – an emotionally intense experience for all. (Tourish & Vatcha 2005,19)

Toursih and Vatcha suggested that this process functioned like a conversion ritual followed by continual indoctrination, in which employees were told that they were "the best and brightest in the world." The workload remained high, and up to 80 hours a week was regarded as normal (Tourih & Vatcha 2005, 15)

Finally, and perhaps most importantly, Enron spent significant resources on creating and maintaining a monolithic organizational culture. This culture had several key elements. In 1997, employees were interviewed about their attitudes, and a new 'visionary' was developed. According to Tourish and Vatcha, this process and its outcomes illustrate the extent of what they call a totalistic culture, with widespread over-reliance on the allegedly superior insights of the organization's leaders. The vision was mediated through an advertising campaign that was called "What We Believe" and that included slogans such as "Change is a goal, Change a habit, Change a mind." According to Swartz and Watkins,

> The whole campaign was not unlike a religious tract from a New Age megachurch, but instead of directing disciples to God, Enron hoped its congregation would be inspired to join its mission to make itself The World's Leading Energy Company.' (Swartz & Watkins (2003, p.103)

One might add that Jeff Skilling himself verbalized the organization's mission as follows: "We were changing the world, we were doing God's work" (quote from McLean, Elkind, & Nocera, 2013, loc 463).

This type of organizational culture was also maintained through rituals of control. Here, Tourish and Vathca referred to Cruver (2003, p.37), who observed that all Enron traders were dressed in more or less the same way. They also suggested that "Enronians" developed an internal jargon that engineered a uniform definition of reality, consistent with a managerially sanctioned vision of the truth. In turn, this tendency established an increasingly conformist culture, structurally reinforced by Enron incentive structures, which included the 'rank and yank' system. This system was based on an internal performance review that rated employees twice per year. Personnel were graded on a scale of 1 to 5 regarding ten separate criteria and then were divided into one of three groups – 'A's, who were to be challenged and given large rewards; 'B's, who were to be encouraged and affirmed; and 'C's, who were told to shape up or leave. Interestingly, top performers were referred to as 'water walkers'. Those in the C category were given until their next review to improve.

Such a system in not uncommon in business organizations, but Tourish and Vactcha suggested that these evaluation rituals were used to assess not only performance but also conformity. It was both arbitrary and subjective, and for this reason, it became too easy for managers use it to reward blind loyalty and to quash brewing dissent, creating a "cutthroat cul-

ture" in which employees did not dare to share opinions honestly or question unethical business practices. As a result, a 1995 survey of employees confirmed that many of them were uncomfortable about 'telling it like it is at Enron' (Tourish and Vatcha 2005, see also, Swartz and Watkins, 2004, p.76). Thus, over time, this cult-like culture of enthusiasm became a prison of uncritical groupthink that crushed both performative and moral self-criticism.

Finally, Tourish and Vatcha also addressed the obvious reason for Enron's downfall, which was financial fraud based on control of the deceptive use of (mis-)information. The information flow within Enron was tightly regulated to secure and reinforce the authority of Enron's leaders. Employees should believe that their leaders know what is happening and that they have the common good in mind. Tourish and Vatcha saw the promotion of the Enron code of ethics, known as 'RICE' (Respect, Integrity, Communication and Excellence), as a particularly ironic example of misinformation:

> As is now known, Enron's leaders disregarded the code in their daily practice – to such an extent that, to take but one of many examples, a 166-page report was published in 1999 entitled 'The Enron Corporation: Corporate Complicity in Human Rights Violations'. It documented, amongst much else, how Enron executives paid local law enforcement officers to suppress legitimate and peaceful opposition to its power plant near Mumbai in India (Human Rights Watch, 2002). (Tourish & Vatcha 2005, 32-33)

The authors suggested that this case was only one example of how Enron was engaged not only in the production and trading of energy but also in illusions. The major illusion, of course, was one of high profitability. When the company collapsed, it became clear that it, in cooperation with Andersen Accountancy, had been capable of overstating its profits by $600 million and shielding $690 million in debts using undisclosed partnerships (Pava, 2003,43). The collapse occurred one year after the company had stated that

> the wholesale gas and power in North America, Europe and Japan will grow from a $660 billion market to a $1.7 trillion market over the next several years (Annual Report 2000, quote from Tourish 2013, 121)

Jewish leadership theorist Moses Pava went beyond the cult metaphor and called these practices idolatry. Pava maintained that the metaphor of idolatry is valid because "how we behave in business makes a difference not just in monetary terms, but as with idolatry, it affects our very identities" (Pava, 2003,47).

Why were Enron's leaders bluffing, reassuring all stakeholders that all was well, when they certainly had access to information that should have raised red flags? According to Pava, the leaders had turned the stock price into the ultimate concern that trumped all other concerns, including the welfare of shareholders, the wellbeing of their employees and the truth. Stated differently, their work had become rituals oriented toward organizational success, measured by the stock price, which shaped their identity and character. In Pava's words, they

were captivated by their own arrogance, certainty, and swagger. The company had become both an idol and illusion, comparable to the golden calf (Pava 2003, 46-48).

Organizational leadership as idolatry – three criteria

In my view, Pava´s proposal seems reasonable, although it is unlikely that Kenneth Lay deliberately created an idol. His self-image was still that of an evangelical Christian serving in the business world (McLean, Elkind, & Nocera, 2013, loc 9046-9053). Tourish and Vatcha's account is also perceptive but still problematic. The main problem is that they seem to conflate classic components of transformational leadership with cultic leadership (see also Tourish, 2013, ch.2). They overlooked developments in neo-charismatic leadership theory that attempt to distinguish between inauthentic and moral transformational leadership (Bass & Riggio, 2005, see also B. Bass & Steidlmaier, 1999). I think that this distinction remains valid, although it is not unproblematic.[10] For this reason, we must develop more cautious and precise criteria that can help us to differentiate between transformational leadership and idolatrous leadership. I suggest, based on the previous theological reflections and findings in empirical cases, that we can identify three criteria.

The first is *self-coronation or self-divinization*. Idolatry occurs when an organization oversteps its mandate to be part of creation and aspires to become its center. Idolatrous leadership places ultimate value on the leader or on a combination of organizational foci embedded in the organization's vision and story. In the cases presented, the key issue was not so much the personality cult but what the cult embodied, the organization itself and its task in "history". Both organizations had a horizon narrative that promoted a grandiose self-image. The Stalinist party saw itself as the primary instrument of Marxist world revolution, whereas Enron would change the way in which business was performed. The latter must also be seen within a horizon narrative, the story of competitive market capitalism and the modern ethos of progress, which in Enron's case took on the meaning of bigger, smarter and richer.

At this point, it might be important to note that idolatry concerns more than ultimate love and desire. It is also about ultimate trust and hope. The *modus operandi* of leadership includes strategic trustworthiness; leaders not only convince followers that a certain goal is desirable, but they also lead followers to believe that the goal is achievable through certain patterns of actions. The Leninist strategy showed a path to the classless world, in which Lay's and Skilling's strategies led "the Enronians" to believe in a prosperous future. If leaders are "merchants of hope" (Napoleon, quote from Vries, 2014,14), idolatrous leaders are dealers in ultimate hope. For this reason, we should include trust and hope as we seek to understand an ultimate concern.

The second criterion is *totalitarianism* or at least a type of *quasi-totalitarianism.* To be idolatrous, the organization must succeed in placing its ultimate concerns at the integrating center at the level of individual life strategies. Leaders must create an organizational culture

[10] Tourish's one-sided critique must be discussed elsewhere. I have discussed the moral quandary of transformational leadership in Tangen (2012, ch11).

of liturgical practices that is so powerful that it trumps other loyalties. In both cases, this process seems to have occurred to a significant degree through the formation of totalitarian cultures that combined charismatic leadership and rituals of enthusiasm with rituals of control that, to some extent, invaded people's inner life. In the case of Enron, evaluations became rituals of conformity in which dissent was strongly sanctioned. At this point, there are interesting differences and similarities between Enron and Stalinism. Totalitarianism was an explicit goal for the Stalinists. In the case of Enron, it was more complex and subtle, yet it seems that Enron in practice built an organizational culture that resembled and came close to being totalitarian. In other words, it was quasi-totalitarian.

On the one hand, it is obvious that the Stalinist state was more repressive and totalitarian than Enron. The rank and yank ritual was relatively humane compared to the horrors of Stalin's regime. Being a part of Enron was obviously also definitively more volitional than being a part of the one-party state. This fact can also be seen in Enron being a company in which up to 80 hours of work were regarded as normal among employees, which could be interpreted in terms of a sort of idolatry that also emerged "from below". Tourish (2016,122) suggested that Skilling hired people who were very young because very young people did not insist on coming in at nine or leaving at five. Thus, it is at least possible to imagine that an 80-hour-per-week, success-hungry "Enronian" might live in a psychological state of singlemindedness surpassing the devotion shown by members of the Soviet state or even members of the party.

The main sign of 'success idolatry', according to Timothy Keller (2009, p.76), is that 'we cannot maintain our self-confidence in life unless we remain at the top of our chosen field'. Thus, individual craving for success can also create an idolatrous culture "from below". Forces from below might also support conditioning from above. As Tourish (2013, 50) suggested, people who work many hours come under intense physical pressure, lose a sense of work-life balance and are therefore less capable of resisting psychological pressure. This process can evoke some of the imagery of the apocalypse, where we see that charismatic seduction is the first choice of totalitarian power, whereas control and open oppression are only the secondary choices (Rev. 13:13-14). From a theological perspective, the Western horizon narrative of utilitarian individualism and its focus on self-realization (see Tangen 2012) might also be considered an ideology with tremendous idolatrous potential.

I also maintain that idolatry could emerge from below in the Soviet Union. This system might have attracted what Jerrold Post called ideal-hungry personalities (Post & George, 2004, 191,195). Letters of gratitude from workers to Stalin, which were initiated by the party, later reproduced themselves without coercion from above (see Li and Soboleva 2014). Idolatry from below could emerge in the form of attributed charisma[11] in the sense that Stalin was associated with divine attributes beyond the official Stalinist story, as demonstrated in the story of the girl's childhood above. At this point, it is useful to maintain with critical realism that organizational structures and cultures condition, rather than determine, individual life strategies. The critical realist model can therefore refine the EVI model by providing a richer

11 For more on attributed charisma, see Tangen and Åkerlund (2018; forthcoming)

account of how idolatry, to some degree, emerges from below in the sense that an idolatrous organization plays on or offers something that people already care about or believe in.[12]

The third criterion is social oppression or *violation of human dignity*. Idolatry can, at least to some extent, be detected by destructive consequences. This consideration is where empirical studies make their main contribution to the EVI model, although the findings of this study are only provisional. The basic destructive mechanism detected here is that of psychological self-aggrandizement. In both cases, there seems to be a type of self-generating grandiosity that follows the idea of being a leader in the most important organization in history. If there is any inclination toward "mirror-hungry" narcissism (see Post & George, 2004, ch 9) in leaders before they are positioned in this manner, it is plausible that such inclinations might be nurtured by rituals of hero worship and storytelling that reinforce a grandiose self-image. In the case of Enron, grandiosity ended as a grand illusion.

The empirical cases also show that there might a connection between grandiosity and denial of truths when facts threaten the grandiose self-image. In both cases, leaders controlled information, misinformed people, and created a culture in which people were afraid to tell the truth. Another tragic consequence of a grandiose self-image is that it can justify violating the human dignity of others. In both cases, the organizations violated human rights; although there were large differences in terms of scale and brutality, grandiose visions legitimized oppression of enemies of the people (Stalinists) or obstacles to success (Enron).

The sense of grandiosity also seems to create different evaluations of people in the organization itself, which can be seen in role performance in the sense that leaders used their positions for personal gain. To investigate this similarity, a larger study would obviously be beneficial. However, from the accounts presented here, it seems clear that Enron allowed leaders to abuse material resources to live life as role models in excess, whereas the Stalinist elite was provided opportunities to abuse power in patron-client relationships. Above, I suggested that a lack of religious freedom is a key criterion of idolatry. If organizations do not intend to become an ultimate concern for their members, they fulfill a minimalist requirement of this type of freedom. However, I will add that any sort of strict control and intrusion into people's inner lives is morally problematic.

Reflections on how to use the criteria in organizational analysis

I now offer some reflections on how these criteria could be applied to analyze the everyday lives of organizations. The point of departure in this article is that worship is an essential part of humanity's purpose, having been created in the image of God (Gen. 1:26-30). Sin and, in particular, idolatry is therefore a distortion of the order of creation. At the same time, one must maintain that God continues to sustain his creation and bless human creativity and organizations that contribute to human flourishing despite degrees of idolatry and injustice (Matt 5:45). Thus, I maintain that all humans are empowered to work in different social spheres that contribute to the common good of humanity and creation. Moreover, although all organizations and rituals have a telos, it does not follow that this telos must be considered ultimate. Thus, the presence of organizational heroes and charismatic father figures, rituals that

[12] For the processes of organizational identification from such a perspective, see Tangen (2012).

create enthusiasm, forms of mentoring, incentive systems, and the creation of group identity through language, symbols and policies do not necessarily indicate that we are dealing with an idolatrous organization.

The same principle applies to certain organizational rituals that are monetary in their orientation, such as budget processes and strategic assessments of the market. These rituals might represent a form of systemic pressure to create "effectivity" and to make the bottom line the ultimate concern, but such processes can be balanced by moral values if leaders identify multiple stakeholders and seek to contribute to the sustainability of the common good. However, the systemic pressures of the market, the power of organizational rituals and individual desire can gradually turn organizational performance into an ultimate and all-consuming idolatrous concern, which seems to have been the case with Enron. Although Lay aspired to be moral leader, it seems that he did not do enough to resist this type of pressure, although it must be said that the final (divine) verdict is yet to come.

The basic problem is that rituals, by their orientation and generative dynamic, can transform organizational concerns into habitual personal desires, whereas critical reflection must be added more actively. Thus, to prevent rituals in the long term from becoming a form of self- seduction, critical reflection should be stimulated by rituals of reflective counter-formation. Here, HR departments could play an important role; yet, as we have seen, idolatry can transform them into departments of conformity. A transition from a legitimate to an idolatrous culture could therefore be somewhat fluid. It follows that leaders do not have to make decisions to move from transformational leadership to a sort of self-deceptive idolatry.

It is for this reason that this study might be of value for Christian leaders in both political organizations and businesses. To prevent transformational leadership from gradually slipping into idolatry, we should regularly ask the following questions, which correspond to the three criteria presented above.

(1) Are we creating quasi-religious organizational dreams and visions, turning a leader, the organization or organizational foci into ultimate objects of hope, loyalty and devotion? (self-divinization)
(2) What are the key rituals in our organization, and what habitual orientations do they form? Do we directly or indirectly build an organizational culture that explicitly inspires and/or implicitly pressures people to see the organization as their ultimate concern? (quasi-totalitarianism)
(3) Are we so taken by the pursuit of success or by images of our own greatness and importance that we allow ourselves to rise above ethical norms and violate the human dignity of others? (violation of human dignity)

In my view, the first two criteria, *self-divinization* and quasi-*totalitarianism,* are the main keys to identifying idolatrous organizations. It is worth noting that these criteria focus on different levels. The first focuses solely on leadership and organizational rituals and might be the easiest to assess. The second includes the effects on the level of individual life strategies and might require forms of research. Researchers might see these levels as related and still main-

tain that both culture and agency have autonomous generative capabilities. We should therefore ask different kinds of sub-questions: In what way is idolatry facilitated from above? Do collective organizational rituals live their own lives without critical reflection? In what ways is idolatry stimulated or resisted from below? One should also look for ambivalence at the level of individual life strategies. As in the case in Enron, it might be strategic to explore how much time and energy people invest in organizational life and to be attentive to a variety of motivations from below.

The third criterion, violation of *human dignity*, is an indication of idolatry, but it would be an over-simplification to suggest that all moral failures in organizations follow directly from organizational idolatry. The relationship might be far more complex and contingent. By seeing idolatry as the root of sin and sin as the root of all evil, theologians who use the EVI model might be tempted into a type of theological reductionism. We might overlook a diversity of social phenomena that also, from a theological perspective, should be understood as intermediate variables. For instance, Stalin's brutality was probably not only grounded in the idolatry of ideology but also caused by the experience of a violent father, the Georgian culture of vendetta, interpersonal political cynicism and several other factors. In some cases, abuse of power in an organization might be rooted in other forms of idolatry, such as greed. Here, patron-client relationships enable, rather than cause, abuses of power. Thus, the third criterion must be applied carefully.

The church as community of counter-formation, mutual discernment and empowerment

I suggest that the church might play a vital role in terms of helping leaders and others to use the criteria outlined above. This role can only be sketched within the framework of this article, but three points can be made. First, the church is a character-forming community that, in relation to idolatry, offers liturgies of counter-formation, although this is not the primary purpose of worship, as Smith (2017) acknowledges. We worship because God is worthy of praise. However, the Christian story and Christian practices are also formative, and they enable us to see the world in a new way, helping us to see its authentic center and to re-order our loves and affections (Land 2010). Second, the church should serve as a community of discernment in which Christian politicians and business leaders, and the rest of us, meet in mutually transforming conversations that can guide the ways in which we relate and work in different types of organizations. The transforming element in these conversations is not only the other dialogue partners but also the Christian story and dependence on the Spirit's presence and guidance.

Mutual support through discerning conversations has both a protective and a constructive function. David Koyzis claims that the most common political visions are forms of idolatry in terms of "taking something out of creation's totality, raising it above that creation, and making the latter revolve around and serve it" (Koyzis 2003, loc 156). This transformation might apply to organizational visions as well, but it does not indicate that such visions are without any value. In contrast, since creation is good, something that is taken out of creation

can reveal fragments of the truth that many Christians have failed to see (Koyzis 2003). Thus, the church should be an arena in which the Christian socialist (rather than Stalinist) can meet the business leader and discuss questions about social justice and entrepreneurial capitalism in light of the Christian story.

Third, the church is a missional community. It is sent to witness to God's saving hospitality in Jesus and to work for the common good of creation, which one day will be fully renewed by Christ. According to Luke Bretherton, the real difference between Christians and non-Christians lies in how God is present within the church and is eschatological in character. That is, Christians are involved in relations, and the church is to be a people specified by its relationship with Jesus Christ; at the same time, it is to display a given culture's eschatological possibilities. Empowered by the Spirit, Christians can serve the common good by bearing witness to how moral problems might find their resolution in and through Jesus Christ (Bretherton 2016). It could follow that biblical models of service and servant leadership (Luke 10:7-10; 22 14-20, Tangen 2018) can guide how organizational leaders perform their missions, although exactly how is contingent on several contextual variables. For these reasons, the church must pray for those who represent Christ in various organizations and support them in terms of providing relational, intellectual and spiritual resources that enable a passionate and prudent missional life.

Finally, if churches are to function as transforming communities, their leaders must also ask themselves the same critical questions presented above. I suggest that both self-aggrandizing charismatic leadership (see also Tangen & Åkerlund, 2018) and organizational success in terms of numerical church growth (Guinness, 1993), as well as other organizational foci, could qualify as candidates for idolatry in an ecclesial context. Instead, the Church's leaders should model doxological and serving leadership (Tangen 2018). Pastors should be aware that they are stewards of God's gospel, which is the hope of the world, yet they should also humbly acknowledge that God can act in different ways through other churches and other organizations in other social spheres.

Returning to objections to the relevance of worship from an analytical perspective

I now return to the objections raised above. The first objection can be re-articulated as follows: Is worship irrelevant in late modern organizations that work within an immanent framework? This study confirms that worship can occur in secular organizations as well, in the sense that rituals can mediate habitual orientations toward ultimate concerns. Whether these rituals are immanent or transcendent is not the question. Thus, the second objection concerning the oppressive potential of worship remains valid, but it is transformed and radicalized by this discovery. We should maintain that worship can be oppressive, but we must also ask the following question: If worship can occur within the immanent frames as well, how can we prevent an ultimate "immanent" concern from invading participants' inner lives and overrunning their integrity?

Here, theologians and non-theologians and Christian and non-Christian practitioners might find common moral ground even when ethical horizons differ. It is worth noting that Christian theology can defend the religious freedom of others on its own terms. Luke Bretherton, for instance, argued quite convincingly that political theology is able to cope with religious pluralism by performing religious hospitality, even beyond the liberal virtue of tolerance grounded in a humanist account of rights (Bretherton, 2016). Christians can therefore cooperate with people of other religions and other life views on an ad hoc basis and can create organizational policies that protect life-view freedom.

Regarding the third objection, which is the question of how a theology of worship can relate to atheist methodology, it might be fruitful to distinguish between incommensurability in terms of meaning and incommensurability in terms of the ultimate criteria for justification and truth. On the level of descriptions and meaning, the third objection seems less relevant. The EVI model translates "gods" into ultimate concerns in a manner that seems fairly commensurable with social science. It is at least highly compatible with studies and organizations that see teleology as a type of functional theology (see Sørhaug,1998, e.g., Plamper 2012, loc.1876-1877). However, on the level of the criteria for truth, different research traditions must engage in a more sophisticated trans-traditional dialogue (see McGrath 2004).

However, if researchers or practitioners want to engage in this or other forms of interdisciplinary dialogue, they might find important resources in the philosophical framework of critical realism (McGrath, 2004, Archer, Collier, & Porpora, 2004). Critical realism offers a stratified view of reality[13] that resists many forms of reductionism, including the type of theological reductionism that was outlined above. However, from an intra-disciplinary perspective, it is equally important that theology watch out for anthropocentric reductionism. In this article, I have argued that the biblical narrative of worship is a theologically indispensable lens for seeing the world and understanding human organizing. Because worship is an essential part of both creation and redemption, theologians cannot settle for a theology of organizations (or a theology of creation) that focuses only on interpersonal ethics or human flourishing, which could be seen as sort of humanistic reductionism in theological disguise.

Conclusion, summary and implications for further research

This study has found that organizational leadership can promote forms of idolatry in terms of granting ultimate value to organizational foci. The ultimate concern promoted by personality cults is, in these cases, not only the leader but also the organization and a horizon narrative that gives the organization and its leader a grandiose self-identity. Moreover, the study has suggested that organizational cultures and rituals can slide into idolatry, even if this slide is not fully intended. The key mechanisms here are charismatic (self-)seduction and psychological control, forming a totalitarian or quasi-totalitarian organizational culture. Finally, when

[13] This view indicates that reality exists in multiple, although connected, levels, "each of which operates according to its own characteristic dynamics and processes" (C. Smith, 2010).

truth is exchanged for grandiose self-images, it leads to the violation of human dignity. Idolatry can be resisted through individual reflexivity.

To prevent transformational leadership from slipping into idolatry in terms of self-divinization, quasi-totalitarianism and the violation of human dignity, we must ask the following questions.

(1) Are we creating quasi-religious organizational dreams and visions, turning a leader, the organization, or organizational foci into ultimate objects of hope, loyalty and devotion?
(2) What are the key rituals in our organization, and what habitual orientations do they form? Do we directly or indirectly build an organizational culture that explicitly inspires and/or implicitly pressures people to see the organization as their ultimate concern?
(3) Are we so taken by the pursuit of success – or images of our own greatness and importance -- that we allow ourselves to rise above ethical norms and violate the human dignity of others?

I have also argued that the church might be a resource for organizational leaders in terms of being a community of counter-formation, mutual discernment and missional empowerment. Finally, the study provokes a range of questions that should be explored in further research. How can we develop a creational and missional theology of organizational life? In which way should the church itself worship and be counter-formative? Finally, we must ask questions about how a theology of Christian leadership in the church and in the world can avoid becoming a repressive form of totalitarianism on its own terms.

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