

MANAGERIAL PSYCHOLOGY AND RELIGIOUS LEADERSHIP*

Alfred Darmanin S.J.

Introduction

The process of interdisciplinary integration and application of psychology and religion has been operating for various branches in psychology: clinical, developmental, educational, social, and personality. These areas have all been explored in view of relating them to corresponding areas in theology. One branch of psychology, however, that has so far been neglected in this regard is the relatively young but rapidly expanding science of industrial/organizational psychology. Only recently attempts have been made to explore the new findings in organizational psychology and relate them to some aspects of religious behaviour.

This reflection prompted me to embark on the challenging and interesting endeavour of examining an area of interest common to both disciplines. One such general area consists in the integration of organizational models into religious settings. How, and to what extent, I asked myself, could models derived from organizational psychology be adequately employed in religious institutions? More specifically: How, and to what extent, could principles and processes derived from managerial psychology be properly applied to religious leadership today?

Such an investigation could open up new avenues of exploration and extend the already vast field of the interrelationship between psychology and religion or theology. For the object of common study is not limited to individuals or groups but extends to the whole institution or organization. Just as in the past the shift from individual psychology to group psychology precipitated the need for a theological reflection on, and a search for pastoral applications of the new field of group dynamics, so managerial psychology may precipitate a similar theological and pastoral need.

* An adapted version of a paper read at the 23rd International Congress of Applied Psychology in Madrid, Spain, July 1994.

PART I: PRINCIPLES

In this section I shall examine the similarities and differences between managerial and religious leadership from a psycho-social viewpoint. Similarities are drawn in terms of characteristics common to both while differences are formulated mainly in terms of goals, values and motivation. The specificity of religious leadership emerges from such comparison and contrast.

Similarities

A religious institution is definitely a special type of organization but nevertheless as an organization it remains subject to the psychological laws of organizational behaviour. As in an organization, in a religious institution, a group of people get together to achieve common goals, share common values, and provide service for the members and for society. Because religious people are human beings with different personalities they are exposed to similar psycho-social phenomena that occur with people in secular organizations. A religious institution cannot ignore, without serious consequences, the basic principles and laws governing human behaviour in organizational settings.

Similarities exist in the concepts and processes that are common to both. The following represent some of them: Leadership style, organizational structure, communication, team-work, active participation, group processes, decision-making, establishing norms, motivating members, conflict management, resistance to change, personnel selection and training.

One can write at great length on each of these phenomena, but instead I shall comment on four others that are more directly related to leadership roles, namely, Management by Objectives, Planning and Evaluation, Delegation of Authority, and Subsidiarity.

a) The first one is the classic organizational principle *Management by Objectives* (MBO). Every organization, whether secular or religious, starts by stating its goals and these become criteria on which decisions are based. A sign of good leadership is the ability to shape and state objectives that inspire and motivate members to strive towards them. Then by trusting in the members' capacity for creativity, the leader would allow them autonomy in the manner they choose to attain these goals.

Properly applied to religious institutions, MBO would stimulate creativity in confiding to each member a mission to accomplish in which she or he is free to choose and invent original ways and means to promote the institutions' ultimate goals.

b) The second factor, *Planning and Evaluation*, is directly related to the first. For planning consists in the working out of strategies aimed at accomplishing the stated objectives while evaluation ensures the control of the same objectives. These two processes are therefore complementary: the pre-programming of an action sets a standard by which results may be measured, and conversely, the evaluation of results checks, verifies and eventually adjusts the proposed programme.

In religious institutions, the idea of planning and evaluation had gradually become not only an acceptable process but even a necessary requirement that has to be periodically undertaken. In some of these institutions, this process is not the sole responsibility of the leader but involves the active participation of all the members.

c) *Delegation of Authority*, the third principle consists in entrusting certain leadership functions to other "subordinates".

It obviously involves the risk that subordinates will make mistakes, do things differently or even worse than the leader would, for it implies delegating the right to be different and wrong. But its long-term effects in increasing initiative, trust and responsible action are highly-prized payoffs.

In today's religious institutions, this principle should prevail between the universal Church and the local churches, within the local churches between bishop and priests and then between priest and laypeople. Among consecrated religious, delegation is applied between the General of an Order and the Provincials as well as between Provincials and local superiors.

d) The last concept to be examined, *Subsidiarity or Decentralization* is a result of delegating authority. Subsidiarity shows respect for the ability of "lower level" leaders to handle their own local problems and to make decisions at the appropriate place of action. It creates an atmosphere of shared responsibility and trust among the members. It allows for greater freedom, initiative and autonomy among the "ranks". It offers excellent opportunities for preparing and selecting future leaders.

The principle of subsidiarity and decentralization is more or less accepted and implemented in religious institutions. In religious congregations, the superior or

provincial simply does not have the time nor the ability to perform all the functions pertaining to the attainment of the goals of the congregation; nor can he or she attend to all the needs of the members of the congregation. It would even be impossible for a provincial to supervise all the activities of the congregation when the members are geographically widely dispersed.

Differences

The number of similarities between business organizations and religious groups should not lead one to believe that the two are identical. There exist in fact basic differences between the two. While they may have similar structures as to concepts, similar dynamics as to processes and similar development as to stages, yet the content and the thrust of these common characteristics may vary considerably. This will become clear and specific in this section.

a) There is a radical difference between the *goals* pursued by secular organizations and by religious institutions. The very nature of the ultimate goals sought by members of religious institutions points to a qualitative difference. The transcendent dimension of such goals - whether they are termed "eschatological", "supernatural", or "faith-oriented" - places religious organizations at a different level from others.

Difference in goals implies a difference in the structure and operation of organizations. According to managerial theory, the objective determines the structure and processes of an organization. Religious institutions are structured according to their mission. This mission is a result both of factors related to contemporary needs of society - "external reality" - and of the proper charism of the particular institution - "internal reality", or what is known as the "character" of the institutes.

b) Implicit in the basic difference of goals, is a difference in *values* and value priorities. Underlying an organization's objectives is a choice of a specific set of values ranked in order of importance. This is especially true for religious institutes. The nature of their mission, the character (or charism) of the community, and the life-style adopted, all reveal value choices. The choosing and internalizing of these values by the members, however, must not be equated with their expression in a uniform manner.

Once a religious institution has opted for a set of prioritized values, the ensuing

organizational processes are conditioned and even determined by them, directly or indirectly. They become the principal criteria for planning, evaluation, decision-making, type of formation, choice of work, selection of leaders, acceptance of candidates, and members' life-style.

c) Another major difference between business organizations and religious institution is the *motivation* factor. The reasons for a person to join a religious institution are totally different from those of an employee who seeks a job, earning a salary, following a career, or even doing creative work. It is a basic option for a way of life that colours one's work, behaviour, life-style.

The motivation for joining a religious institution necessarily focuses on a faith-oriented life in which God occupies a central place. This cannot but have an impact on the manner of applying managerial concepts to religious life. In a religious perspective, one is responsible and accountable not only to peers and to the organization but also to God. In other words, religious people are inspired and motivated by their religious founder's message and values in exercising authority, making decisions, and fulfilling responsibilities.

d) Another difference is the fact that employees in an organization only work together while in certain religious institutions members also *live together*. This obviously influences the psycho-social processes that take place among the members. The roles, leadership, team-work, types of interaction, interpersonal conflicts, formation of "cliques", lack of differentiation between work and leisure (and sometimes between home and the workplace), all these naturally shape and modify the application of organizational behaviour to such religious communities.

e) Other differences may be listed. Membership in religious institutions is totally voluntary, a person chooses freely to join a religious institute. That is not always the case with business or industrial organizations. One cannot ignore the differentiating effects that voluntary membership has on the functioning of an organization.

Finally, becoming a member of a religious institution is usually intended as a life-long commitment. For the individual this provides a certain psychological security. For the institution, this provides stability of personnel, better long-term planning, feasibility of training programmes, etc. On the other hand there are risks involved: recruiting the wrong people, handling resistance to change, having more "problem" members, and taking advantage of the life-long commitment either by the individual against the institution or vice-versa.

Specificity of Religious Leadership

Let me postulate what I consider to be specific to leadership in religious institutions in contrast to that in a secular organization.

The role of any leader in general is to help the members of the group or organization to achieve their goals. If the aims of religious institutions are fundamentally of a "spiritual" nature, then the purpose of a religious institute consists in living out the faith according to the spirit of the particular religion. This spiritual or religious perspective is the "raison d'être" of a religious institution.

It follows that leadership among religious people must aim primarily at helping the members to deepen their faith, facilitate their spiritual growth, and favour an atmosphere for the development of religious values. In this sense, religious leadership, more than a position or a function, becomes a ministry.

In its formal aspect, I suggest that the distinctive quality of religious leadership is to be found in the theological virtues of faith, hope and charity that are characteristic of the Christian kerygma. The specific role of the religious leader would consist in offering a faith vision to the members in a creative way, inspiring them through Christian hope, and motivating them by God's love.

Translated into concrete daily activities, this form of leadership would determine the specificity of the role, functions, qualities, characteristics and style of the religious leader. It would still adopt managerial models and concepts, but these would be transformed and integrated into a specifically religious orientation.

Thus, planning would be made in function of apostolic mission, decision-making would be incorporated in a discernment process, group dynamics would be used to improve community living, managerial skills would help develop one's gifts for ministry to others, training programmes would be adapted for religious formation, budgeting would respect the spirit of poverty, authority would be exercised in conjunction with religious obedience, and so on.

PART II: APPLICATIONS

Let us now examine how specific managerial concepts and processes may be incorporated within religious institutions. We shall limit ourselves to a brief application of a few of them.

Authority and Religious Governance

Within religious institutions, new leadership models had been developed in reaction to classical models of authoritarian leadership. The new trends emphasized the principles of collegiality, subsidiarity, delegation of authority, corresponsibility and participatory decision in religious governance. These changes influenced significantly the principle and practice of religious leadership. Important developments took place in structures of government, decision-making procedures, concepts about authority, and attitudes towards leadership.

There has been a fundamental shift from hierarchical to horizontal models of government. Structures are increasingly designed to ensure participation by members in major decisions and to provide for decentralization and subsidiarity so that decisions are made at the level at which they will be implemented. These structures and decision-making processes are made sufficiently flexible to enhance the capacity of the congregation to respond to contemporary signs and needs.

Religious institutions are becoming more adept at shaping mechanisms for accountability in order to ensure the institute's understanding and experience of its mission and the individual's fidelity to that mission. These new directions have influenced ministry options, election processes, forms of local government, corporate planning, and methods of personnel placement.

A shift has thus taken place in the role of authority conceived more as a service exercised within the community rather than from above. The idea of identifying one person as the representative and interpreter of God's will, having as it were a direct hot-line with the Holy Spirit, is fortunately disappearing. What is emerging is the concept of the entire community as responsible for the common good and the corporate mission.

Communal Decision-Making

Closely related to the authority issues are decision-making processes, both individual and communitarian. The processes now being developed are based on and promote participation and communication. Communities are making use of communal discernment processes, goal-setting principles and planning methods. Placement and community, goal-setting principles and planning methods. Placement and community assignment procedures attempt to balance creatively social and ecclesial

needs, individual giftedness, and personal and institutional goals. These processes result in the formulation of broad guiding principles rather than legislation about specifics, of major life and mission directions rather than details about daily activities and behaviour.

As a result of all this, members' attitudes towards their religious leader and each other have evolved. There has been a rejection of a dominance-submission relationship or of a parent-child attitude. These have been replaced by a peer relationship, consultation, communication and lateral interactions within the community. Members feel responsible for the community mission and accountable for its realization. They are more willing to assume personal responsibility for their own choices in the light of the community goals.

Leadership Styles in Religious Institutions

The familiar categories of leadership styles adopted in managerial settings may be applied to religious institutions.

The *dictatorial* style manifests itself in the religious leader who wants to have a lot of power over the members and demands absolute submission of them. He or she is constantly afraid that the established institution will collapse. Everything is centred around the rule, structures and rigid laws. The members of the institution are scared of such a religious leader: they feel alienated, dehumanized, victimized.

In the *paternalistic style*, religious leaders adopt the Old Testament patriarchal style, considering themselves as parents or acting as teachers who pass on the truth to students. They like to make the subjects dependent on them in a way that these obey them blindly and believe in whatever they are told to do. The attitude of paternalistic religious leaders towards their role is that of "I'm the superior here, I have God's special grace, I express God's will."

The *bureaucratic* religious leader is more task-oriented than person-centred, Always busy and overwhelmed with paper-work, such a leader shows more concern for performance by the members than for their personal needs. Loyalty to the religious institution is important for them, and their followers are listened to, respected and supported as long as they show such loyalty. They welcome suggestions but they want to have the final word.

Religious leaders exercising a "*laissez-faire*" style see their role mainly as

listening, clarifying, facilitating and supporting but never confronting their members. In their non-directive style, they do a lot of sharing and discussions but little or no decision-making. Their over-concern for interpersonal relations may hinder their task responsibility. By over-reacting against the legalistic, institutional, bureaucratic frame of mind, they may swing to the other extreme of totally unstructured organization.

Characteristics of the *democratic* style are found in the religious leader who is caring for the community members and at the same time efficient in achieving institutional goals. Such persons are enthusiastic leaders, full of initiative and creativity. Towards their members they can show empathy and understanding but also confrontation when this is necessary for their own good or that of the institute.

The notion of *servant* leadership has been best developed by Greenleaf (1977). Servant leadership is not only consonant with religious leadership, it should be its mode. From the Christian perspective, the servant model was the one adopted by Christ, the leader and the founder of Christianity, who came "not to be served but to serve." And every ministry in the Church is essentially a "diakonia", a service. While ministry is distinct from leadership, true Christian leadership can only be exercised as a ministry or service.

The religious leader who realizes that servant leadership provides an excellent alternative to an autocratic, laissez-faire or democratic model has indeed reached a high level of consciousness. Though this level may remain an ideal or a vision since it is rarely found in practice, it nevertheless offers a perspective and an orientation for the other styles.

Training of Religious Leaders

Further studies could be devoted to the relationship between managerial psychology and religious leadership in the whole area of training and developing religious leaders. This common denominator constitutes a source of major concern both in management circles and in religious sectors. They both experience similar problems and obstacles but they also share common learning resources.

A training programme for religious leaders should aim not only as a preparation and formation of religious leaders in the future, but also and especially for their ongoing formation.

The necessity of designing and implementing such leadership training programmes is becoming more evident today than ever in the past. Both individuals and organizations are painfully aware of the negative impact an ineffective leader can have. On the contrary, when leaders are well-trained, when their leadership skills are better developed, when they undergo a constant process of formation, then such programmes prove beneficial not only for the personal growth of the leaders and their followers but also for the development of the organization or institution.

Conclusion

Religious institutions that adopt managerial concepts and processes by adapting them to their particular context can derive great benefit for their own development and renewal. The striking similarities between management methods of industrial enterprises and religious institutions suggest ideas and practices that would give greater effectiveness to the dynamics of religious institutions.

I believe that, in their nature and purpose, religious institutions have the potentiality for integrating within their structure and functioning, the principles, concepts and processes derived from organizational psychology. However, in incorporating concepts and processes derived from managerial psychology, religious leaders should transform and integrate these concepts within a specifically religious orientation.

Finally, may this paper stimulate closer dialogue between psychology and religion towards an integrated approach to leadership, and may it contribute to a fruitful exchange between organizational psychologists and religious leaders.

Department of Psychology

University of Malta

Msida

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Adams, A.M. (Ed.) *Effective Leadership for Today Church*, Westminster Press; Philadelphia (1978)

Cada, L. Fitz, R. et al., *Shaping the Coming of Age of Religious Life*, The Seabury Press; New York (1979)

Darmanin, A., *The Skilled Leader: An Integrated Approach to Leadership*, Media Centre Publications; Malta (1986)

Darmanin A., *Developing Leadership Skills: A Manual for Training Leaders*, Media Centre Publications; Malta (1992)

Greenleaf, R.K., *Servant Leadership*, Paulist Press; New York (1977)

Hall, B.P., Thompson, H.B., *Leadership Through Values: A Study in Personal and Organizational Development*, Paulis Press; New York (1980)

Meissner, W., *The Assault on Authority: Dialogue or Dilemma?*, Orbis Books; Maryknoll, New York (1971)

Overman, C., *Concepts for Religious Leadership*, Passionist Leadership Institute; Cincinnati, Ohio (1981)