Review of 'The Dark Side of Transformational Leadership' by Dennis Tourish

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As leadership has become an arena of debate and argument in secular organizations, the same is true in religious bodies including churches. Dennis Tourish is a Professor of Leadership and is widely published on many aspects of the subject. His latest book is a critique of leadership as agency, which the author sees as a dysfunctional understanding and so seeks a more balanced approach for the betterment of all organizations. This is a significant book for those facing calls for a more transformational style of leadership in their workplaces and in those voluntary organizations to which they belong. Interestingly, Tourish draws throughout this volume on religious imagery starting with a discussion of evangelism in the film *Elmer Gantry* (1960) and the frequent human hope ‘for the appearance of a Messiah figure’ (p 5).

The book is divided into three parts: the first examines the theoretical side of leadership; the second explores a variety of leadership case studies including Enron and the religious cults of Jonestown and Heaven’s Gate; whilst the final part seeks to draw out wider lessons from the theory and practice under discussion.

In the opening chapter the author defines positive leadership as: ‘when we attempt to influence others, ideally for a common purpose. It is not about imposing one’s will on recalcitrant others, as Hitler and Stalin did on a devastating scale and as many still try to do on a smaller canvas’ (p 15). Tourish maps out his journey as a voyage around the dark side of human nature to see what goes wrong with leadership practice whilst seeking to discover what can be learnt for the future. Chapter two offers a review of how transformational leadership has emerged as the predominant understanding in the field and how charismatic leadership in business is very similar to forms of behaviour in religious cults. The third chapter examines the role of power in forms of coercive persuasion that exist in organizations, which is followed by an unsettling exploration of ‘spirituality at work’ and how that can be co-opted into establishing monocultural workplace environments. Chapter five tackles the importance of feedback and dissent within organizations, together with the risk of ingratiating filtering out necessary critical feedback. Finally, in this first section, Tourish sets out five key ways in which business schools could improve their education of leaders.

The second part of the book takes four case studies and applies the author’s ideas to the worlds of business, banking, politics and religion. One of the central analogies running through all these areas of organizational life is how ‘cultic’ practices can be found in many instances of transformational leadership, e.g. cult-like behaviour in Enron included ‘the development of a compelling and totalistic vision, intellectual stimulation aimed at transforming employees’ goals while subordinating their ethical sense to the needs of the corporation … the promotion of a common culture which was increasingly maintained by punitive means’ (p 133).

The final part begins with a summary of Tourish’s thesis thus far: ‘leadership, as traditionally envisaged, is a key part of the problems we now face, rather than the solution. This is particularly true of transformational leadership, in its various guises’ (p 199). He concludes by setting out the need for a renewed understanding of leadership and ‘followership’ which is characterised by mutuality, interaction and being co-producers of organizational performance. In addition, leadership and followership must always be contextual and related to each organization’s unique situation. In other words, ‘effective leadership development cannot be bought “of the shelf” in a supermarket of
ideas’ (p213). Such a perspective has significant implications for churches as well as other organizations. For example, the controversy over the Church of England’s Talent Management for Future Leaders (‘The Green Report’) published in 2014 is located in precisely Tourish’s area of discussion and he argues persuasively against the reification leadership and turning it into an idol to be worshipped.

However, a couple of cautionary points can usefully be made. First, in using the word ‘cult’ to describe the dangers of transformative leadership he is not using the term in a technical, anthropological sense. It is a loose analogy and cannot be pressed any further than that. Second, in identifying leadership as: ‘a process whereby leaders and non-leaders accomplish each other through dynamics of interaction in which mutual influence is always present’ (p 210), he might be running the risk of leadership disappearing altogether. Nevertheless, there is much in this volume to overturn the sacred cow of leaders as exclusively successful agents and open a helpful conversation about the much broader context in which leadership takes place.

*Vaughan S Roberts is Team Rector of Warwick a contributor to Michal Izak, Linda Hitchin & David Anderson (eds) Untold Stories in Organizations (Guilford Press, 2014)*