


Leadership challenges in Christian non-governmental organisations

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This article refers to selected issues elaborated from my interdisciplinary doctoral thesis accomplished at the University of South Africa in 2019. I investigated the ethical-theoretical frameworks as well as practices of Christian humanitarian non-governmental organisations (NGOs) in Germany by combining a theoretical part (including philosophy, theology, business studies and development studies) and an empirical part. The empirical part was accomplished by interviewing 11 NGOs from the humanitarian field (development and/or relief agencies in an international context). The findings of theory and practice showed that many Christian NGOs typically conform to the secular mindset and regulations in order to be able to function as organisations. The results also revealed that Christian NGOs have difficulties in defining their identity in order to be attractive and convincing to their current and prospective employees and donors. In addition, organisational and hierarchical structures are mostly taken from business companies but do not necessarily always fit to the individual organisations. The research is significant because it shows to what extent these NGOs experience tensions and insecurities having to work in a secular environment, and it helps to identify some typical challenges that Christian organisations face in Western countries. The purpose of the thesis was to impact on the reflection and practice of leaders of NGOs in their quest to understand developments and paradigm shifts, and ensure that they will act in a recognisably Christian way.

Contribution: This article has been held as a presentation at the Leadership Conference in Pretoria, South Africa, in 2019. It contributes to the research of specific Christian leadership, and particularly of leadership in Christian non-governmental organisations. This article aims to describe the challenges these organisations face, having to work in the midst of a secular environment.

Keywords: Business ethics; Theological ethics; Leadership; Non-governmental organisations; Secularism; Christian faith; Charity; Human rights; Emergency relief; Development aid.

Introduction

Having worked for some years as a Chief Executive Officer (CEO) in a subsidiary office of an international humanitarian non-governmental organisation (NGO), I have made some observations regarding mind-set and conduct of Christian NGOs. For example, I have observed that Christian NGOs in the West must work rather quietly, in the midst of societies that are pluralistic and secular where theological issues are not mentioned in public, maybe with the exception of words like 'Christian values' or others that sound innocuous and harmless. Another example is that in Christian organisations, the position of CEO often involves taking turns between being a management professional and a theologian, and after a certain time this juggling starts all over again. A last observation is that there are challenges with regard to leadership and communication issues that do not fit well with Christian behaviour, as I thought should be the case, for example, cold-blooded dismissals of people, and others. Thus, the subject of the thesis deals with the question: *which ethical frameworks (consciously or unconsciously) influence the organisational practices and behaviour of Christian organisations?* In order to answer this question, three sub-questions need to be discussed, namely: (1) how do Christian NGOs relate to the society and world in which they live? (2) how is ethics understood and lived out in a Christian organisation? and (3) how do Christian NGOs deal with ethical matters in their organisations?

To answer these questions, it was necessary to draw from philosophical and theological-ethical literature as well as from business ethics and specialised literature regarding development and relief organisations. After discussing the methodology briefly, we will discuss some of the findings of these three sub-questions.

Note: Special collection entitled Christian Leadership, sub-edited by Wessel Bentley (UNISA).

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Methodology

The subject of this study is the real-life phenomenon of Christian NGOs. The overall structure of this thesis is based on a model of reality that consists of three aspects: world-views (philosophy and theology); organisational ethics; and the praxis in humanitarian NGOs. These three aspects are interrelated with one another: theory is not only applied to practice – in a deductive manner – but as in a circular process in which both theory and practice are interrelated.

The research design of the thesis consists of an extended analysis of the relevant literature and of theological, ethical and practical reflection, as well as semi-structured, one-on-one interviews. The empirical research helps to modify the theoretical research in a way that it is able to shape or modify the existing theory rather than developing new constructs and concepts as is usually done with a grounded theory.

The sample of the interviews encompassed 11 NGOs from the humanitarian field, which means from development and/or relief agencies in an international context. The headquarters needed to be in Germany, and (if possible) have at least 50 employees (not counting volunteers). Those Christian NGOs needed to be affiliated to Protestant-Evangelical churches, Protestant-Free churches or Catholic churches. Semi-structured interviews were held with top managers (CEO) or board members. The questionnaire comprised 50 questions on the foundation of nine key issues, such as sources of ethical thinking, Christian identity, decision-making, tension between business and ethics, issues of management, leadership, organisational issues and others. Questions were conducted as ranking choice questions, yes-or-no-questions and open-ended questions.

Non-governmental organisations in relation to society

Regarding the first sub-question, namely, how Christian NGOs relate to society and their surrounding world, the main finding was that rationalist and secular ethics, especially from the Enlightenment¹ onwards, increasingly disregarded the theological contribution in favour of scientific, so-called 'rational' and 'objective' sources, and, thus, ruled out faith. The result was a separation between the material and the spiritual, as well as faith and reason. Germany, together with most Western countries, has become an individualistic, secular society, and this has influenced Christian NGOs to a great extent. The NGOs have answered a variety of questions regarding their sources of ethical thinking, their motivation as well as their different activities and their interactions with the secular world around them. Some of the findings are as follows:

The source of morality for the Christian NGOs comes from the Bible, human conscience as well as Christian theological thinking. They are convinced that human beings should aim

¹The era of Enlightenment is the epoch of the history of science and thought, which unfolded in the 17th and 18th centuries. Religiously shaped views on nature, state and society were questioned. Instead, in the search for the truth, it relied primarily on reason, experimentation and experience.

to live a good life by loving God and others. Also, the motivation of humanitarian organisations stems primarily from a feeling of an obligation towards the needy ones. In addition, a sincere concern for the needy and a sense of personal fulfilment when being able to help could be identified as a basic motivation. Several themes and credos are used in the NGOs as important key statements, all taken from the Bible, and thus confirming the biblical source stated previously. Non-governmental organisations identify what motivates potential staff members by conducting interviews and confronting them with typical situations in order to find out their personal views.

Christian NGOs observe secular standards and codes, such as the seal of approval for donors, but they mostly ignore Christian codes. Both secular and Christian codes ensure credibility for the donor, but the secular codes are needed by all NGOs in order to receive public funding. The decision to turn to the secular, instead of the Christian codes, may thus simply have pragmatic reasons rather than a turning away from Christian values or downplaying their identity.

It was also found that regarding social ethics, God's love and the Kingdom of God are emphasised within both Protestant and Catholic social work where socio-political goals are put into practice to make the world a better place. Christians, and in particular Christian NGOs, clearly need to be engaged in this vision, and they should understand and know about social ethics and its historical and biblical roots. The empirical part showed that the knowledge of social ethics does not seem to be very strong within the organisations.

Also, it was found that Christian NGOs suffer from ambivalent approaches from the secular environment, because, on the one hand, institutions and governments are open to Christian faith with regard to humanitarian work, but, on the other hand, a public manifestation of religious issues makes it difficult for NGOs to receive public donations. In addition, they are expected to be 'neutral', which is not possible because nobody is neutral. The empirical part confirmed this ambivalent situation: Christian NGOs admitted that a certain downplaying of their Christian faith cannot be avoided when donations are at stake, and that some of them experience a certain insecurity in their work because of these ambivalent approaches.

Summing up the most important findings in sub-question one, it can be said that, whereas the ethical sources of the interviewees point to a clear Christian tradition and to the Bible, there is a strong compliance with secular society. Christians working in the humanitarian field have partly accepted and adopted humanistic attitudes to enable their organisations to function. This is also because of the fact that secularism has become the dominant ideology in the humanitarian field (Arumugam 2014:33), in which faith as a motive for social action is discarded. This must – inevitably – lead to situations where Christian NGOs and their leaders encounter difficulties in expressing their Christian faith within a secular society and towards their stakeholders.

How ethics is understood and lived out in the non-governmental organisations

This part answers the second sub-question, namely, how Christian ethics is understood and lived out in the organisations. As mentioned, the scientific-rational worldview was established because of the Enlightenment, which can also be observed and applied to economic matters. Rational economic thought began with classical liberalism that was based on a misunderstanding of Adam Smith's doctrine of self-interest (Smith [1776] 2001:17) and was adopted later by other thinkers such as David Ricardo and Jean-Baptiste Say. As a consequence, the working place, faith and everyday life that were previously perceived as a unity started to become fragmented.

This rational view, together with the model of the *homo oeconomicus*, remains the main way in which economics is taught in Germany today (Wöhe & Döring 2013:3). This model is based on the assumption that business is about rational behaviour only, and the aim of business is the accumulation of wealth and money, with the highest possible efficiency, ignoring emotions, ethical reasoning and religious convictions. In the last few decades, a behaviourist approach has emerged as a counter-concept of the rational model of the *homo oeconomicus*. This includes specific psychological aspects that focus on the autonomy and self-assertion of the human being and argue that behaviour is influenced by environmental factors. It is probable that Christian NGOs have leaders who have been formed in these secular and humanistic ways. As the empirical study showed, they use different concepts of both rational and behaviourist approaches.

The empirical study has shown that the Christian NGOs interviewed were indeed familiar with the concepts of rational business, as observed in the profit business world. This was the case, for example, with efficiency issues, not least because of the strong competition among Christian humanitarian NGOs in Germany. Christian NGOs have also shown that they use the methods of modern human resources naturally, such as elements from staff and organisational development with its psychological content. Even if the behaviourist approach places more attention on the human worker and includes more human-related issues, Christian NGOs should understand the humanistic background of the behaviourist and psychological approaches, such as the concept of the human autonomy. Christian NGOs, thus, should draw on other ways of thinking but not in an uncritical way that denies Christian beliefs.

Virtue and character were issues that were present as early as the era of the Greek philosophers, but it was more recently, however, that thinkers again emphasised the importance of virtue ethics and character. Christian ethics requires this emphasis on moral behaviour and moral formation. But, in mainstream business literature, moral formation and

character issues play no role or are mistaken for professional skills that are not sufficient. The empirical part revealed that character issues as part of Christian ethics in an organisation receive little emphasis. The necessity for something like character formation in the organisations was also practically non-existent; it is not currently offered to the employees and not fostered within these NGOs. Although the interviewed organisations could describe important character traits for their employees and leaders, they do not have a character-check for potential candidates. Professional competence and other skills receive more attention. Christian NGOs should, therefore, think about ways of integrating moral formation for all employees, and, in particular, for their leaders.

The literature study showed that the corporate culture is the collection of values and norms shared by all the members of an organisation. Culture, however, is only one part of a framework that is aimed at establishing a coherent corporate identity. The aim must be to establish a corporate Christian identity that is not directed only at the employees but can also be perceived and understood from the outside. All elements (corporate culture, appearance and image), therefore, need to show how the organisation lives out its convictions and its values, and how it deals with secularism in the humanitarian sector, such as a critique on terms like 'neutrality' or evangelism. They need to be coherent in order for the NGO to be credible and in the same way attractive to current and prospective donors and employees. This could be accomplished by clarifying the values and basic assumptions of the corporate culture as a first step through employee surveys or cultural analyses. The corporate image describes the characteristics of the organisation in the eyes of outsiders, for example, through objects or behaviours that need to be analysed as well, for example, by way of surveys or interviews (Scholz 2014:422–423).

Also, for most of the NGOs, to have professional skills was more important than being theologically skilled. But of course, in reality, both are needed in a Christian NGO to be able to function well.

Non-governmental organisations suffer from the influence of secularism in a way that makes it hard for them to express their faith; the responses of the Christian NGOs regarding their self-understanding, for example, revealed that some NGOs struggle to see clear differences between Christian and non-Christian humanitarian organisations. Significantly, some of the interviewees did not see any differences at all.

Amongst the interviewed Christian NGOs, a number of principles, values and ethical codes are stressed, but whether they are put into practice in a systematic way is not clear. Most of the NGOs do not appear to know how Christian values can contribute to the success of the whole organisation. This also correlates with the fact that there are almost no visible patterns of behaviour or symbols. Most Christian elements are formal elements, such as devotions at the beginning of meetings or a worship service once a week

(that admittedly was not attended in high numbers, if it was voluntary). To summarise, the Christian profile, as well as a corporate identity, seemed to be shaped rather weakly within the interviewed organisations.

In the theoretical study, another finding was that not only individuals but also organisations are moral agents. The empirical part revealed some insecurities in handling this very important matter. Clarification of this matter is, however, necessary in order to address good governance, structures, moral learning, responsible change and ethical culture.

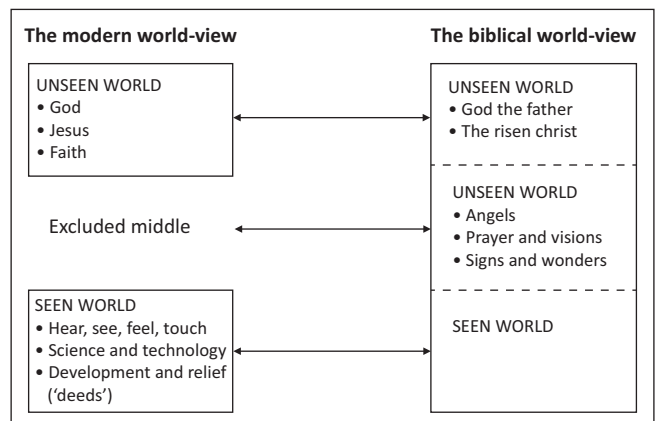
To conclude the second sub-question, namely, how Christian ethics is understood and lived out in their organisations, it can be said that here also the influence of secularism (or rationalism) can be observed, instituted by a narrow ethical approach that prevails in the economy and is taught in the universities. Many of the leaders of NGOs may be shaped consciously or unconsciously by the thoughts of the *homo oeconomicus*, the mathematical-rational approach of how to lead organisations and also by the predominant separation of business and ethics. This becomes evident not only in the weak self-understanding of their Christian identity but also by the almost non-existent handling of character and character formation, which is not emphasised.

Specific ethical matters in the organisations

Apart from discussed topics and challenges regarding humanitarian organisations (such as corporate stewardship, corporate citizenship, stakeholder engagement, systems of integrity, organisational structures, change management and others), there are also three theological issues that leaders of Christian NGOs have to deal with.

The first issue is the world-view. In Figure 1, we can see the modern world-view on the left-hand side compared to the biblical world-view on the right-hand side. In the biblical world-view, we see dotted lines between the seen and the unseen world. There are no strict separations – in contrast to the modern world-view.

In his article, 'The flaw of the excluded middle' (1982), Paul G. Hiebert observed that not only is religion separate from science, but there is also an excluded middle part in the Western world-view that functions between those two extremes (Hiebert 1982:43, see Figure 1). The middle part is about the supernatural and this-worldly part, where spirits, witches, local ancestors and ghosts exist. Christian humanitarian workers from the West have immense difficulties in addressing issues that relate to this middle section (Hiebert 1982:43). Bryant Myers, the former vice president for International Program Strategy at World Vision International, expanded on Hiebert's model and stated that the divisions taking place in the modern world-view result in separating 'word' and 'deed' in development work



Source: Hiebert, P.G., 1982, 'The flaw of the excluded middle', *Missiology: An International Review* 10(1), 35–47. <https://doi.org/10.1177/009182968201000103>; slight adaptation from Myers, B.L., 1999, *Walking with the poor: Principles and practices of transformational development*, Orbis, New York, NY.

FIGURE 1: The separation of word and deed in the modern world-view.

(Myers 1999:9), where development work belongs exclusively to the 'deed' part, which in most of the cases means meeting material needs. Obviously, this understanding of 'deeds' correlates with the expectation of a secular environment to behave in a 'neutral' way, as mentioned before.

The empirical part has shown that Christian NGOs in Germany separate 'word' and 'deed'; they have also yielded to the pressure exerted by a secular society, umbrella organisations as well as supra-national organisations and governments by excluding appropriate evangelistic activities from their agendas. However, spiritual realities of the unseen world need to be addressed, along with the spiritual needs of both members of the organisation and the beneficiaries.

The consequence of this is reflected in a typology of Christian faith-based agencies elaborated on by Laura C. Thaut, a US-American political scientist from the University of Minnesota. Her taxonomy seeks to explain how Christian faith-based agencies differ from one another, how their theological tradition shapes their humanitarianism and whether or how they are distinct from secular agencies (Thaut 2009:319 ff.):

- *Accommodative* humanitarian agencies are virtually indistinguishable from secular agencies despite their religious roots. Their mission statements strictly exclude religious goals and Christian faith is not required of staff. In addition, the funding is not dependent upon religious sources.
- *Synthesis* humanitarian: these agencies attempt to balance Christian orientation and secular goals. They clearly define their mission and desire to serve as a Christian witness through their service. They do not, however, engage in proselytising.
- *Evangelistic* humanitarian: the most religiously oriented with evangelism incorporated into its humanitarianism.

By discussing this taxonomy with the interviewees, it became clear that more than half of the organisations had difficulties defining their Christian profile. None of them called themselves 'evangelistic humanitarian', and some of

them called themselves ‘accommodative humanitarian’. Christian organisations that are indistinguishable from secular organisations have lost their Christian visibility and uniqueness. While a wrong type of evangelism ought to be criticised, to ignore the faith basis of Christian NGOs within the organisation and also in the field work is counter-productive, especially when the NGOs are working in countries that are open to the Christian faith.

Another issue is that of charity and human rights. In the New Testament, the parable of the Good Samaritan shows an example of charity by defining who ‘a neighbour’ is (Lk 10:25–37). The value of the parable is that it has moved people and organisations to do as the Good Samaritan did and go forth and help the needy for nothing in return. Many NGOs have drawn directly or indirectly on the parable of the Good Samaritan as an expression of neighbourly love, compassion and charity, and it may be one of their prime motives for their work, even if the message is at times misinterpreted as an instruction for disaster relief (Eichberger 2015:68; Kröck 2007:368).

Significantly, there are Christian NGOs that see the parable of the Good Samaritan as anachronistic, because, compassion is at its core linked to a difference in status and power (Dehn 2017:n.p.) in the sense that the one who is compassionate is *above* the needy. Christoph Dehn, a former deputy member of the executive board of a well-known German Christian NGO, holds that charity is not needed any more, because the beneficiaries should no longer be objects of welfare but owners of rights (Dehn 2017:n.p.). This statement seems strange and disconcerting owing to the fact that both charity and human rights are important. Dehn (2017:n.p.) stated, ‘That compassion gradually takes a back-seat – perhaps it is a blessing’². With these statements, Dehn gives up the idea of charity by replacing it with arguments of the Human-Rights-based approach. This seems to be a very narrow view given the fact that the Christian social tradition is based on unified concepts of justice and charity. The empirical part of the thesis has shown that many interviewees share this view.

In addition, the term ‘charity’ seems to be more and more replaced by the call for justice (Hankela 2017:49). Terms associated with Christianity, such as ‘charity’ or similar concepts, are described in negative terms in the recent social justice debate (Hankela 2017:48). Significantly, the 17 sustainable development goals (UN, n.d.) were criticised by the envoys of 24 faith groups not only because of being too numerous but also because ‘words like selflessness, sacrifice, love, compassion, duty, generosity and charity are entirely absent’ (Erasmus 2015).

In addition, in March 2017, the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR 2017) launched the ‘Faith4Rights’ framework during an expert workshop in Beirut.

2.Original quote: ‘Dass die Barmherzigkeit allmählich in den Hintergrund tritt – vielleicht ist es ein Segen’.

The ‘Faith4Rights’ concept ignores the specific Christian roots of humanitarian work. Instead, the declaration is fully spiked with verses from the Bible, Quran, sayings of Buddha, Bahai and others. The under-title of the Declaration is the old Sufi proverb, ‘There are as many paths to God as there are souls on earth’ (OHCHR 2018:7). This approach seems to be based on a pluralist world-view. It can be argued that, with the growth of significance of supra-national organisations in the humanitarian field, this may become more important and also very challenging for Christian organisations.

Another important issue that arose in the empirical study is that there seems to be a general dissatisfaction and a certain frustration regarding the relationship of the church towards them and the organisations. The interviewees do not primarily take ideas and impetus from their churches into their work-place. The churches to which the interviewees belong seem to ignore some of them in their business life and in this way contribute to the perceived rift between spiritual and business matters.

Concluding this third sub-question, namely, how Christian NGOs deal with ethical matters in their organisations, it can be said that the empirical study affirmed the assumption that Christian NGOs and their leaders are strongly influenced by secular thought: firstly, we mentioned the separation of ‘word’ and ‘deed’ in analogy to the modern world-view. As a consequence, we have seen that Christian NGOs are mostly indistinguishable from secular ones. Also, the fact that charity is being replaced by the human-rights-based approach has been confirmed by many NGOs. There is quite a lot of frustration on the cooperation with the different churches that apparently are not helpful for the work-life of the leaders.

Conclusion

Christian NGOs are influenced by the philosophical and theological ethics shaped by ancient Greek and other philosophers as well as a large number of Christian theologians. Also, they are influenced by business theorists as well as by their societies. In my investigation, I have focussed on ethical (philosophical and/or theological) frameworks that have an impact on the business life and practical performance of Christian NGOs. As a consequence of enlightenment, a narrowing-down of religious thought occurred. With it came a separation of the material and the spiritual (and of faith and reason), individualism, secularism and relativism. Christian NGOs in Germany are strongly influenced by this narrow thought that brings about many challenges and insecurities for their leaders and the entire staff.

Leaders of Christian NGOs need to take care:

- that their NGOs build on a holistic world-view that does not separate ‘word’ from ‘deed’ and the spiritual from the material

- that a clear profile is established in the organisation. Christian NGOs need to cope with the tough challenges of faith pluralism that may become stronger in the near future. Without the cooperation of the churches, this may not be accomplished in a satisfying way
- that they understand the theological–philosophical aspects of their work, and they may, thus, need to question the narrow secular stance of governments and their institutions. They also need to know about Christian ethics, especially social ethics, because here they can find the link between their work and their faith in more concrete ways, both from an individual and organisational point of view.

Leaders in Christian NGOs are responsible for the functioning of their organisations and for including the requirements of their stakeholders. In the same way, they are responsible for establishing a Christian identity in their organisations and may thus need to question the requirements of a secular society and their institutions. It can be argued, though, that leaders in Christian NGOs may not be aware of their own underlying world-views and may be influenced by humanistic thought, which has consequences for the work in their NGOs and their behaviour towards their stakeholders and their organisations.

The thesis showed that, for a majority of the interviewed Christian NGOs, faith issues and ethics are separate from work-life, and work-life is mainly filled with the concerns about the thought and processes of their deeds. However, they also have strong convictions that send out positive signals into a secular world; for example, the activities that Christian NGOs take part in help shape public life, the positive role models of the Bible, the way they care for corporate citizenship, etc.

The thesis (that includes a high number of tables) can be seen as a contribution to clarify some important issues to improve and strengthen the work of Christian NGOs in secular Western societies. It contributes to the findings of Christian faith-based NGOs in their relationship with a secular environment on macro-, meso- and micro-levels. This research has included ethical frameworks, philosophical and theological-ethical thought as well as business ethical thought and their implications for the attitudes, work and behaviour of Christian NGOs. It has shown how Christian NGOs are affected negatively by the developments triggered by the historical separation between faith and reason. This has severe consequences for the way in which Christian NGOs work, how they perceive themselves and those they strive to help.

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The author declares that she has no financial or personal relationships that may have inappropriately influenced her in writing this article.

Author's contribution

A.M.C. is the sole author of this research article.

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Data availability

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Disclaimer

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