



# A systems theoretical servant-leadership framework with reference to Christianity and positive psychology

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## Abstract

Traditionally, psychology and Christian theology are viewed as two incommensurable secular and sacred paradigms. This conceptual article explores the convergence of systems theory as a metatheory, Christian theology and positive psychology in order to construct a servant-leadership framework. Integration of concepts from theology and psychology is evident in the leadership framework. A leader influences followers and achieves transformation or change through a perspective of humans as bundles of potential and contributors to a network of positive relationships. To serve others is more important than being served. Tolerance with ambiguity and paradox in uncertain environments is a key driver in this leadership framework as well as a focus on character strengths and positive values. The triad, Identity, Hope and Love are described as conceptually the highest themes of servant leadership. In the visually constructed framework, the intersection of positive psychology and theology depicts the roles of a servant-leader as being those of systems thinker, hope merchant, paradox patron and identity inventor.

**Keywords:** systems theory, servant leadership, positive psychology, Christian theology

## Introduction

For I do not seek to understand in order to believe, but I believe in order to understand. For I believe even this: that unless I believe, I shall not understand (Anselm of Canterbury).

What has Athens to do with Jerusalem? In this rhetorical question, Tertullian (cited in Entwistle, 2015) asked what agreement there is between secular knowledge and sacred knowledge. The philosopher Tertullian was of the opinion that the Christians of his day had to make a choice between seeking knowledge through human reason (Athens) and through faith (Jerusalem). Before psychology emerged as a scientific discipline, questions about the mind and behaviour were considered by philosophy, religion, medicine and folk wisdom (Entwistle, 2015).

The founding of the *Journal of Psychology and Theology* in 1975 inspired scholars to address the integration of theology and psychology through the generation of theories; however, since 1982, model development has declined (Worthington, 1994). Articles published in this journal may be classified into two groups. About two-thirds of the articles published from 1980 to 1986 used a *conformability* model where psychological facts are reinterpreted in the light of Scripture or vice versa. The remaining articles used a *compatibility* model, in which secular and theological concepts and facts are given equal weight (Worthington, 1994).

Scholars in both fields focus on their own fields of specialisation generally do not attempt to integrate psychology and theology into their respective theories. For example, the founder of



personality psychology, Gordon Allport was a Harvard psychologist who disguised the role his Christian faith played. He stripped the psychological concepts from their spiritual dimensions to describe personality as an object of scientific enquiry (Tjeltveit, 2013). In the evolution of psychological theories at the time, behaviourism and logical positivism was on the rise (1927) and Allports' separation of the two disciplines is understandable. He thus never described personality and character through a combination of psychological, ethical and theological perspectives, which could have provided a more holistic or systemic understanding of human behaviour.

Since 2002, there has been a significant increase in workplace spirituality and leadership research, as well as on the issue of what is termed the "corporate soul" (Graves & Addington, 2002; Kim, 2002; Mitroff & Denton, 1999). Workplace spirituality describes the apparently intrinsic sense of spiritual ambience that mimics a religious site as displayed in certain workplaces. Such an ambience may include the quality of the interrelationships between employees and those between employees and the stakeholders of the organisation (Grobler & Nicolaidis, 2014) and describes the psychological contract between the organisation and the employees. Spirituality and a strong psychological contract in the workplace enhance collaboration and partnership in the organisation. If the psychological contract is in place and employees experience congruence between their own values and the values of the organisation, they tend to be more loyal which improves overall organisational performance (Grobler & Nicolaidis, 2014).

The integration of the two disciplines of theology and psychology traditionally search for metaphysical assumptions. Psychology assumes unconscious or relational motivation for behaviour or transformative behaviour while Christian faith assumes a conscious motivation through the acceptance of God's grace, holiness and being in the right relationship with Him. A common interest for both disciplines is the phenomena of personal transformation and change, an important aspect in understanding leadership behaviour.

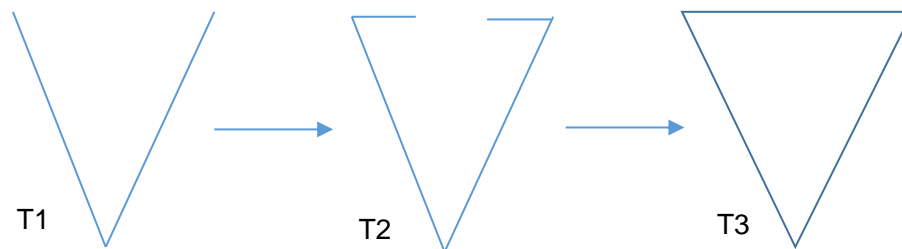
A study exploring religion and work–faith integration (Lynn, Naughton & Veen, 2010) succinctly covers the salient points in this field of study. The authors postulate that work and faith are generally integrated for Christians, but that the extent of integration may vary according to the variables *ability*, *intent* and *opportunity*. *Ability* describes aspects related to age, gender and formative influences. *Intent* describes church attendance, denominational strictness and faith maturity, while the variable *opportunity* describes the broader culture, geographical salience, professional status, immediate work setting and size of the employing organisation.

Workplace spirituality and work-faith researchers appear to focus on the consequences of spirituality with little attention being paid to the content of belief systems. Furthermore, existing empirical research reflects studies related to the individual and the "Self", with little devoted to areas related to interpersonal relationships or the "Other", such as the psychological contract depicted by Grobler and Nicolaidis (2014). While much has been written about the interdisciplinary integration of psychology and theology, limited research exist where the focus is on the "Other". In addition, a leadership framework that integrates concepts from Christian theology and positive psychology within a systems theory paradigm does not exist.

This article explores the integration of paradigms to obtain a deeper understanding of servant leadership. The leadership framework will be conceptualised by adopting systems thinking as a meta-theory. To address the question, How may a servant-leadership framework be conceptualised from both a Christian theology and a positive psychology perspective? the author studied the theoretical intersection of theological and psychological concepts

The question is further explicated in Figure 1 below. T1 (Triangle 1) in the figure depicts two diverging lines; the one represents concepts from Christian theology and the other concepts from positive psychological theory. In T2 in Figure 1 (Triangle 2), the two lines are moving

closer and in T3 (Triangle 3) the two paradigms are connected. This study aims to contribute to the interdisciplinary integration of theology and psychology by proposing a servant-leadership framework. The framework could be applied by Christian counsellors and organisational psychologists to articulate their own Christian theory of counselling or organisational development in practice.



**Figure 1: Convergence of sacred and secular theoretical paradigms**

The integration of two seemingly different paradigms is encouraged by the words of St Thomas Aquinas (Whidden, 2014: 2):

We must love them both, those whose opinions we share and those whose opinions we reject. For both have laboured in the search for truth, and both have helped in the finding of it.

Integration is an attempt to expand knowledge through a mindset that inspires and directs activity and may not be an achievable end-point in itself, as Entwistle (2015:19) described:

Integration is a priori, a thing that we discover when we are uncovering the fundamental unity that God created, however much it might currently appear to be dis-integrated. On the other hand, integration is also something we do as we create ways of thinking about, combining and applying psychological and theological truths. If Christ lays claim to all of one's life, then integration becomes not just feasible, but imperative.

Collaborative scholarly discourses may not only be beneficial but are also imperative in the era of the Fourth Industrial Revolution. The Founder and Executive Chairman of the World Economic Forum, Klaus Schwab (2018:1), states:

The Fourth Industrial Revolution has the potential to robotize humanity, and thus compromise our traditional sources of meaning – work, community, family, identity. Or we can use the Fourth Industrial Revolution to lift humanity into a new collective and moral consciousness based on a shared sense of destiny. It is incumbent on us all to make sure that the latter is what happens.

Yet, epistemological humility is required to consider the possibility that the ideas may be wrong in the light of the reality we want to unveil (Stevenson, Eck & Hill, 2007). Despite attempts by integrationists to unveil the truth and discover common issues, evangelical and psychology scholars have to accept that the whole truth will not be fully grasped. The apostle Paul reminds us of our finitude in his letter to the Corinthians:

We know only a portion of the truth and what we say prophesy in part, but when completeness comes, what is in part disappears. For now we see only a reflection as in a mirror; then we shall see face to face. Now I know in part; then I shall know fully, even as I am fully known (Corinthians 13:12, 13).



In academic discourses there would appear to be confusion relating to the conceptualisation and practice of servant leadership (Horsman, 2018). Servant leadership is more than a leadership theory, a style or a mere concept comprising characteristics such as persuasion and stewardship. Rather, it is a philosophy, an emerging worldview – a way of being in the world. Systems thinking as a metatheory is introduced in an attempt to integrate concepts and theories from Christianity and positive psychology into a larger systemic framework of servant leadership.

Consequently, two concepts from systems theory, namely, *synergy* and *paradox*, will be briefly described, followed by selected concepts from Christian theology, positive psychology and servant leadership. Finally, an integrated conceptual framework for a deeper understanding of servant leadership will be constructed.

## Systems theory

Before the body of knowledge on systems thinking emerged, Newtonian scientists had an image of the world that may be compared to a large clock. Knowledge about how the clock worked would enable you to predict what could happen at any point in time. They believed in certainties and not probabilities. Reductionist thinking seduced leaders and managers into thinking that everything could be controlled by good planning, even life and death. Management's dream of perfect levels of control seemed to be the reality. Science appeared to have replaced God. However, the idea of a mechanical world and a machine-like universe were unsustainable and unconvincing, as Zohar (1990:18) describes:

Classical physics transmuted the living cosmos of Greek and medieval times, a cosmos filled with purpose and intelligence and driven by the love of God for the benefit of humans, into a dead, clockwork machine. Human beings and their struggles, the whole of consciousness and life itself were irrelevant to the workings of the vast universal machine.

At the turn of the previous century the cosmic clock image of Newtonian science crumbled with an important scientific finding. Physicists discovered that the behaviour of the atom and the individual electron could not be predicted, as they behaved in random and unpredictable ways. Quantum physics was discovered where atoms may simultaneously be both stable and unstable. The Heisenberg uncertainty principle (Wheatley, 2006) explains the phenomenon where matter can show up as particles in specific points in space, or as waves, that is, energy dispersed over a finite area. The belief in a predictable cosmos was now on shaky ground because it lacked a subatomic foundation (Henning, 2009) and the world became an unpredictable place to live in.

The quantum world is strange and is often described as “spooky”, as physicists reached for various metaphors to describe it. Following this paradigm shift, Zohar (1990:27) created an image of this new world depicting it as “a vast porridge of being where nothing is fixed or measurable ... somewhat ghostly and just beyond our grasp”. According to the astronomer, James Jeans, “the universe begins to look more like a great thought than like a great machine” (cited in Capra, 1983:86). Patterns of organising dynamics such as relationships and interdependencies shifted Newtonian thinking, contesting earlier perspectives.

Systems thinking was introduced by Von Bertalanffy in 1947 and since then various scholars in the field have contributed to the development of general systems theory. This theory may be applied as a metatheory, that is, as a model of the general elements of reality where real systems are open and in interaction with both the internal and the external environment. A system may be considered as a whole formed by a number of interdependent components working together to achieve a common goal (Henning, 2009).



## **Synergy: the whole is greater than the sum of its parts**

The focus of systems theory is on the *relationship* and *interaction between the parts* of a unit so that the organisation, its functions and outcomes can be understood as a whole. The components of a system do not function in isolation, but all subsystems co-create an outcome as a result of the various interactions, involving energy, humans and information from the external environment. Synergy describes the way in which the interaction between parts of the system has a greater effect on the whole than the sum of the individual parts. This is also true for the dynamics in teams and organisations where open exchange of information and communication between individuals may lead to innovative products or marketing strategies.

This is confirmed by the apostle Paul in his letters to both the Colossians and the Ephesians:

All the broken and dislocated pieces of the universe – people and things, animals and atoms -get properly fixed and fit together in vibrant harmonies, all because of his death, his blood that poured down from the cross (Colossians 1:20).

You don't need a telescope, a microscope or a horoscope to realise the fullness of Christ and the emptiness of the universe without him. When you come to him, that fullness comes together for you, too. His power extends over everything (Colossians 2:10).

He makes the whole body fit together perfectly. As each part does its own special work, it helps the other parts grow, so that the whole body is healthy and growing and full of love (Ephesians 4:6).

In agreement with Paul, relationships are not just interesting, for many physicists they are *all* there is to reality. Elementary particles are described as a set of relationships that reach outward to other things (Stapp, cited in Capra, 1983). The process of these interactions can be plotted but no particle can be drawn independent from the others in an effort to describe a certain setting or an outcome of a process. Similarly, human beings do not exist independent of relationships with others. With relationships we give up predictability and open up to potentials. The process by which particles meet and change is important as each particle is a *unique bundle of potential* (Wheatley, 2006:35).

Likewise, each human being is a bundle of potential like any particle in the universe. Different settings, different colleagues and different leadership styles may evoke certain qualities and behaviours in a person and leave others dormant. In each of these relationships a person is different, new in some way (Wheatley, 2006).

Predictability and control of the management of organisations through a reductionist, deterministic and positivistic approach are no longer relevant. Organisations should not be viewed as stable entities but rather as dynamic systems that contain the seeds of change. Instead of analysing organisations as independent individual components, interacting on a linear continuum of force and reaction, social scientists should study the non-linear shapes in motion in organisations as systems, as the qualities of living systems as they pertain to the behaviour of individuals and teams. Empowering leadership development interventions should occur through a relationship of networks that lies beyond the traditional, rigidly structured boundaries.

## **Paradox**

The term “servant leadership” seems paradoxical in itself. The words *servant* and *leader* are used as opposites to describe a particular way of being as a leader. A central question that a servant-leader should ask is: *How can I understand my leadership role within a context in*





which I must provide both guidelines and directions to employees while simultaneously creating dialogue and emotional involvement with a serving consciousness? Individual and organisational well-being in the 21st century presents a paradox: despite improved physical conditions in the workplace, employees seem to experience increasing mental health issues and more work-related stress (Dolan, 2007). Dolan (2007) further states that despite the progressive, technologically advanced age in which we live, the world is deteriorating emotionally and morally. Despite many positive outcomes of community support and encouragement, the global outbreak of the Covid 19 pandemic exposed inequalities between societies and also various social illnesses such as an increase in gender-based violence; child and elderly abuse cases; vandalism of schools and liquor stores as well as an increase in cable theft. Increased political polarisation of citizens and falling trust levels in global leaders will require a new type of leadership, collaborative and inspiring, to address the huge systemic changes and to succeed in delivering a human-centred future in which societies may flourish (Schwab, 2018).

In response to the traditional leadership theories, a greater focus on research concepts such as complexity, ambiguity, internal consistency, contrast and paradox emerged. Neumann, Keller and Dawson-Shepherd (1997) remark that it has become necessary for organisations to become comfortable with contradiction and paradox and to reward employees for believing six impossible things before breakfast, as the Red Queen in *Alice's adventures in Wonderland* (Carroll, 1865) advised. A paradox arises when two true and mutually exclusive elements (thoughts, feelings or actions) show themselves to be interconnected when seen in relation to one another (Lusher, 2019:8).

Organisations are being progressively perceived as fluctuating and dynamic processes rather than stable and predictable structures. Traditional leadership tools are becoming irrelevant in changing situations which require radical turnaround strategies, where operations need to be restructured or redesigned. A single leader with hero status, who drives change top-down, is seemingly not assisting employees to operate within complexity. While these situations may often be experienced as contradictions, they could be seen as interconnected elements. Both elements may be true and can in fact be managed with the same solution (Lusher, 2019). A leader should be able to *unparadoxise* by creating a new understanding that includes the ends of the paradox and also points toward adequate actions. To create meaning out of a seemingly contradictory, ambiguous world with conflicting truths demands a leader with integrative thinking skills and the practise of free will.

The theological concept of “free will” is a paradox. God created things that have free will, which implies creatures that can do either wrong or right. A person is free to be good but also free to be bad. Free will makes evil possible, but it is the only thing that makes love or joy or goodness worth having. Without free will, we would be robots and God obviously prefers to relate to human beings and not to machines (Dennett, 2015).

### **Positive psychology**

The epistemological foundation of positive psychology originated in 20th century psychology. It is embedded in humanistic and existential psychology and is defined as the study and optimisation of positive behaviours and feelings (Snyder & Lopez, 2002). Its origins may be traced back to the ancient Greeks such as Aristotle and Plato, who emphasised notions such as “the good life” and “civilisation”. Maslow (1970) was the first to use the term “positive psychology” with his emphasis on self-actualisation.

Positive psychology emphasises concepts that elevate individuals, teams and organisations and is an umbrella term that unifies a variety of strength-based virtues and capabilities so that both individuals and communities can thrive and be sustainable. It may be defined as the examination of virtuousness or the best of the human condition (Cameron & Spreitzer, 2012).



Strength and high levels of performance are not only to be found in the good times but may also be evident in resilience during stressful times or painful circumstances (Wissing, Potgieter, Guse, Khumalo & Nel, 2014). Wissing et al. (2014) also remark that during South Africa's truth and reconciliation process as part of the transition period to a democratic government, many strengths and positive traits were evident such as meaning-making, forgiveness, hope, spirituality, gratitude, compassion and justice.

Concepts such as *hope* and *love* are some of the positive traits that form part of the common vocabulary in this body of knowledge (Peterson & Seligman, 2003). Scholars in this field seek to understand optimal individual states rather than pathological states or illnesses. In addition, areas of interest include the generative dynamics that may lead individuals, teams and organisations to resilience, restoration and the fostering of extraordinary performance. Popular discourses often refer to this field of study as the "the science of happiness", although positive psychology differs from and is more than a superficial study of happiness. The World Happiness Report 2020 has been released recently and is an annual landmark survey of the state of global happiness which ranks 156 countries by how happy their citizens are. The United Nations Sustainable Development Solutions Network tracks the happiness of nations by the way citizens rate their own lives.

Regarding happiness, C. S. Lewis (1952:20) asserts that the:

... happiness which God designs for His higher creatures is the happiness of being freely, voluntarily united to Him and to each other in an ecstasy of love and delight compared with which the most rapturous love between a man and a woman on this earth is mere milk and water. And for that they must be free.

From a Christian theological perspective, he states further that

... the primary purpose of our lives is to establish a relationship with the Person who placed us here and until that relationship is established, all of our attempts to attain happiness will always fall short (Lewis, 1952:20).

When looking at Holy Scripture the importance of *hope* and *love* is made manifest:

For now we see in a mirror indirectly, but then we will see face to face. Now I know in part, but then I will know fully, just as I have been fully known. And now these three remain: faith, hope and love. But the greatest of these is love. (1Corinthians 13:12-13).

Otherwise, according to him, we would think of this world our home rather than a place we are passing through: "... the Creator refreshes us on the journey with some pleasant inns, but will not encourage us to mistake them for our home" (Lewis, 1952:21). Furthermore, he is convinced that although humans do have the right to seek happiness, we do not have the right to happiness itself:

This sounds to me as odd, as a right to good luck, a right to be six feet tall, or to have a millionaire for your father or to get good weather whenever you want to have a picnic (Lewis, 1952:22).

It is the opinion of this author that in defining a servant-leadership framework, the vocabulary of deficit and pathological thinking, as well as a one-dimensional focus on mere "happiness", should be contrasted with a vocabulary of strengths and virtues through the integration of concepts from systems theory and positive psychology.



## Identity

The apostle Paul proposed a triad comprising faith, hope and love to the Corinthians. These three aspects together shape the identity of a Christian as a way of being:

Christianity is much more than theology; it is an encounter with Christ that redeems and reorients human lives ... it is less a system of thought than it is a commitment to follow God with heart and soul and mind that lays claim to all life (Entwistle, 2015).

But without faith it is impossible to walk with God and please Him, for whoever comes near to God must necessarily believe that God exists and that He rewards those who earnestly and diligently seek Him (Hebrews 11:6).

The concept of *identity* is fundamental to Christian theology, psychology and leadership theories. A biblical understanding of a person's identity highlights humanity's connection to the rest of creation. Humans were created in the image of God, the *imago Dei*. We owe our lives and allegiance to the Creator. As His image bearers we are intended to be God's representatives on earth, reflecting His identity. In essence, we are to do what He would do: lovingly rule and care for creation (Entwistle, 2015). Paradoxically, we are part of creation and also uniquely instructed to steward it. Humans are told to tend to creation, that is, to develop its potential. Art, agriculture, education, science and literature are available to be discovered and developed by us who bear the image of God.

Jesus Christ was a servant and also truly God. This implies that we too should have a servant consciousness to relate to others as *bundles of potential*.

I will give thanks to you, because I am fearfully and wonderfully made (Psalm 119:14).

Know that the Lord is God. It is He who made us, and we are His; we are His people, the sheep of His pasture (Psalm 110:3).

From a system psychodynamic perspective, scholars are encouraged not to lose sight of the idea that interacting "I" identities are simultaneously forming and being formed by "we" identities (Henning, 2009). An organisation consists of individuals and their identities influence each other reciprocally. The two entities are one but, paradoxically, also separate.

Dependence, finiteness and the insufficiency of the human being's mortal life, which belongs to God's plan for creation, are facts to be accepted with humility. In Christ, our identity is paradoxically both image-bearers of God and finite creatures and fallen beings.

## Hope

As part of the positive psychology family, the concept of hope has a long history, also featuring in Judeo-Christian discourse as one of the main theological virtues.

Systems thinking offers a theory that is hopeful because of concepts such as "adaptation", as opposed to traditional deterministic psychological approaches. Constant change in all living systems creates possibilities for renewal and thereby hope. The result is endless variety and innovative behaviour and the ability to find solutions to problems of a paradoxical nature. Hope is also inherent in identity, which is the experience of self in the presence of things future. Maintaining the experience of hope may be a meta-motive in identity construction, as it emerges in the favourable progression of a leader's development narrative. Stories of past achievements provide blueprints of experiences with which a leader may build a belief in attaining future outcomes. In the predictability of events, hope enables creative discovery





which is also rooted in nature, within rhythmic patterns such as the change of seasons and the life stages.

Research in positive organisational scholarship and leadership (Luthans, Van Wyk & Walumba, 2004) suggests the enhancement of the psychological capacity of hope in South Africa through the following practical guidelines:

- Leaders can be sensitised to the nature of hopeful thinking.
- Hope can and should be developed by coaching and mentoring hopeful strategies.
- Leaders should “own” the goals they want to achieve.
- In leadership, hope may be developed through rehearsals and experiential exercises.

Organisations are described as “meaning-creation entities” (Lusher, 2019). Developing a servant-consciousness also involves the capacity to assist in creating meaning and purpose in a working environment by mentoring hopeful thinking and strategies. Snyder (1989), a leading researcher in hope, found that people find meaning and purpose by thinking in terms of goals, pathways to reach those goals and the belief or motivation to reach those goals. By encouraging responsible participation and interdependence between individuals, collective meaning may be created on an individual, team and organisational level. “Meaningful information lights up a network and moves through it like a windswept bushfire. Meaningless information, in contrast, smoulders at the gates until somebody dumps cold water on it” (Wheatley, 2006:151).

Cameron and Spreitzer (2012) also postulate three qualities of hope. Hope as a relational possibility, hope as an open-ended system and hope as a generative concept reflect the characteristics of a system in the optimum state of wellness. Any leader who functions from this stance with his followers will be able to transcend challenges and provide a compelling vision. Dewey (1933) constructed the concept of moral imagination, by which people conjure up ideals of human betterment to guide action in the present, an important consideration in leadership development interventions. A servant consciousness with acts of hope may involve acts of moral imagination where betterment of the human condition is the final horizon.

## **Love**

Love is the essence of life and the basis for human existence. Love is a principle that directs people so that they promote order in the entire realm of God’s world (Van Zyl & Nortje-Meyer, 2018) and is therefore relevant for servant leadership. Jesus taught that the greatest commandment is to “love the Lord your God” and the second is to “love your neighbour as yourself” (Matthew 22:37–40; Mark 12:29–31; Luke 10:27–28). Loving God is the most important act that one can perform as a Christian, the second being the act of loving one’s neighbour as oneself.

It is the opinion of this author that leadership is by definition relational rather than individualistic in its orientation. Theological discourses relating to self-identity direct readers away from narcissism. Readers of Ephesians are advised to avoid being narcissistic. According to Van Zyl and Nortje-Meyer (2018), the Ephesians are repeatedly told that God’s calling for the church is that it lives for something beyond itself – “for the praise of his glory” (Ephesians 1:12, 14).

Servant leadership emerged as an antidote to the current leadership crisis and the leader-as-hero perspective. The choice to serve first adds a different perspective to leading through an inclusive relational perspective which has a transcending potential to revitalise organisations and society (Horsman, 2018). Love for self as well as for others is inherent in the motive for desiring to serve first. Humans are relational beings and paradox is also evident in the concept of love. Being in relationships may be painful but it also enables humans to learn what is most



meaningful, to develop emotional and spiritual maturity: “as we become more aware of our capacity for love, we are tested with the choices of whether or not be honest, responsible, moral, generous, forgiving and humble” (Horsman, 2018). In developing a servant-consciousness to lead, Smedes’s (1993:3) words are relevant:

The power to do this is Agape love. In Agape love God models the love in his relations with sinners, the love that drove Jesus to the cross. Agape love is the liberating power that moves us towards our neighbour with no demand for rewards. Do not ask whether you are able to love: without thought of reward. Just understand that God’s love is the power to move us in that direction.

In Paul’s triad of faith, hope and love, he remarked that love is the greatest (1 Corinthians 13:1; 13): If I speak with human eloquence and angelic ecstasy but don’t love, I’m nothing but the creaking of a rusty gate. If love resides in you (1 John 4:16; 10:30; 15:4), then everyone’s dignity is valued and respected (Van Zyl & Nortje-Meyer, 2018). Through love a servant-leader has the capacity for authentic, respectful relationships which promote trust, fulfilment and meaning:

Where hatred only sees evil, love reveals values. Love commands commitment and joyfully carries it out, no matter what the sacrifice involved. Where hatred reinforces bias, love dissolves it, whether it be the bias of unconscious motivation, the bias of individual or group egoism, or the bias of short-sighted common sense. Where hatred pods around in ever narrower destructive circles, **love** breaks the bonds of psychological and social determinisms with the conviction of **faith** and the power of **hope** (Hanchin, 2010:573).

Positivity in relationships increases the quality of interactions between partners and provides the foundation from which a person, team and organisation may develop purpose and direction. The abundant nature of love is relevant because an appreciation of the compassion and generosity of others nurtures a desire to reciprocate, to contribute and to serve the greater good (Horsman, 2018). Love suggests mutuality instead of hierarchy and drives a leader to *pass it on*. For a servant-leader this means continuing to be of service to others through the desire to mentor knowledge and skills and also to be mentored.

## Servant leadership

The purpose of leadership is to create meaningful frameworks so that employees can succeed in their tasks as efficiently as possible. The majority of leadership theories are committed to one paradigm which traditionally reflects a power relationship and does not allow for concepts such as empowerment and co-creation. The psychoanalyst, Freud (1921:123), was of the opinion that “the leader himself need to love no one else, he may be of a masterful nature, absolutely narcissistic, self-confident and independent”. This definition of leadership neglects the importance of those being led, the followers, and thus called for a reinvention of theory and practice as early as 1921.

Currently, crises such as high-profile political scandals, financial fiascos, corruption, environmental catastrophes and infectious diseases reverberate across the globe. The word “crisis” derives from the Greek word *krinein*, which means a time when one has to decide. It provides a turning point or “moment”; not necessarily something to fear, but something which brings about a change in our way of knowing the world (Mabey & Morell, 2011). Mabey and Morell (2011) state that it can also be argued that leadership theory is in the midst of its own crisis: a time of self-critique and re-evaluation. The catastrophic events described may have a positive impact on leadership practice and theory as they may expose the shortcomings of outmoded orthodoxy to introduce more radical ways of working. Specifically, this may puncture the pomposity of self-sufficiency, the myth of someone being in charge, the hubris of having



all the answers (Mabey & Morell, 2011), as defined by Freud. When a 'leader' is lacking in deep self-reflection and emotional intelligence, he or she becomes egotistical.

In general, leadership can be defined as the activity of willingly involving oneself, influence, coordinate and guide people's organisational activities in order to attain positive goals and outcomes for the organisation according to the existing context and set strategy. Recent studies have shifted the emphasis from the individual to contextualised, collective leadership. Research on the psychology of leadership development interventions is informed mainly by a humanistic conceptualisation and positivist operationalisation. Furthermore, current intervention practices often seem to be grounded in a deficit approach to human development.

The work of Greenleaf (1970) is seminal to understanding the philosophy of servant leadership. His work stems partially from the teachings of Jesus who instructed his disciples that servanthood is the essence of worthy leadership (Hughes, Ginnet & Curphy, 2015). Jesus put his words into practice by washing the feet of His disciples. Since Greenleaf's writings, many researchers have attempted to operationalise his descriptions, for example Sipe and Frick (2009:4), who state that "a servant-leader is a person of character who puts people first, who is a skilled communicator, a compassionate collaborator, has foresight, is a systems thinker and leads with moral authority". Senge (2002) remarked that a servant-leader is committed and invites, rather than demands, commitment from others. Crucially, there is room for choice; this allows one to be committed and still live in the domain of doubt, which fosters humility and tolerance.

Horsman (2018) compares a servant-consciousness to a spiral galaxy, describing it as a cosmic worldview. Both a servant-consciousness and a cosmic worldview are open evolving systems and in perpetual transformation. The author further states that servant leadership is profoundly relational, creative, holistic and integrative (Horsman, 2018:3). As a moral approach, this perspective concurs with Wheatley (2009) who depicts a human being as a *bundle of potential* similar to particles in the universe that could be developed towards greater personal flourishing. A serving-first leadership style nurtures greater personal and collective meaning and flourishing and greater relational engagement (Horsman, 2018).

In Greenleaf's (1998:5) view: "At its core, servant leadership is a long term, transformational approach to life and work-in essence, a way of being that has potential for creating positive change throughout our society." This philosophy caused academics to debate the difference between transformational leadership and servant leadership. Greenleaf (1998) is of the opinion that from a systems theory perspective, efforts to differentiate between the two definitions are unnecessary.

Servant-leaders may apply developmental and transforming processes to reach specific goals (Horsman, 2018) which may be applied on an individual, team, organisational, community and, possibly, also a global level. Such a systems approach requires a leader to have an understanding of human nature and of the systemic processes involved in human and organisational transformation. A servant-consciousness arises from an attitude of serving first, is inherently transforming and is inspired by compassion, generosity, gratitude and joy (Horsman, 2018). Horsman (2018) describes the primary capacities that influence the development of a servant-leader; these include moral authority, promoting community, listening first, pathfinding foresight and systems thinking. Jesus informs us that:

"The kings of the Gentiles exercise lordship over them, and those in authority over them are called benefactors. But not so with you. Rather, let the greatest among you become as the youngest, and the leader as one who serves" (Luke 22:25–26).



Servant leadership has detractors as well as adherents. The most common criticism is that the idea may have popular appeal in its “soft” form but that serving others is an end in itself rather than a means to reach organisational goals. The great majority of leaders are deficient in the realm of genuine concern for humanity. However, a recent study found that servant leadership can have an impact on profits by increasing trust in the organisation, reducing customer complaints and turnover, and improving employee satisfaction to a limited extent (Hughes et al., 2015).

## Synthesis

In the late 1990s, Brian Eck identified and critiqued 27 models for relating theology and psychology (cited in Entwistle, 2015). These models may be useful, are often accurate but are inevitably imperfect. In this article the current author does not claim perfection with the proposed framework but offers a unique perspective for understanding servant leadership.

Leadership is defined as a process in which a leader has to exercise influence on others in order to achieve organisational goals (Lusher, 2019). Communication in the form of information is central. Paradoxically, in the 21st century there seem to be improved physical conditions in the workplace environment while psychological conditions are deteriorating and work-related stress increasing among employees on a global scale. For a leader to maintain positive relationships with followers and keep an individual, team or organisation moving forward, the author proposes the servant-leadership framework illustrated in Figure 2.

The visual framework is constructed using a Venn diagram embedded within a greater circle. The outer circle represents the systems theoretical paradigm with identity, hope and love as the main systemic concepts. The main systems paradigm incorporates two inner circles, namely, Christian theology and positive psychology. The integration of theology and psychology is reflected in the intersection of the two inner circles where the four roles, namely, a **S**ystems Thinker, a **H**ope Merchant, an **I**ntity Inventor and a **P**aradox Patron, redefine the “ship” in servant leadership. The conceptual framework for servant leadership in Figure 2 depicts the way in which these concepts relate to each other visually.

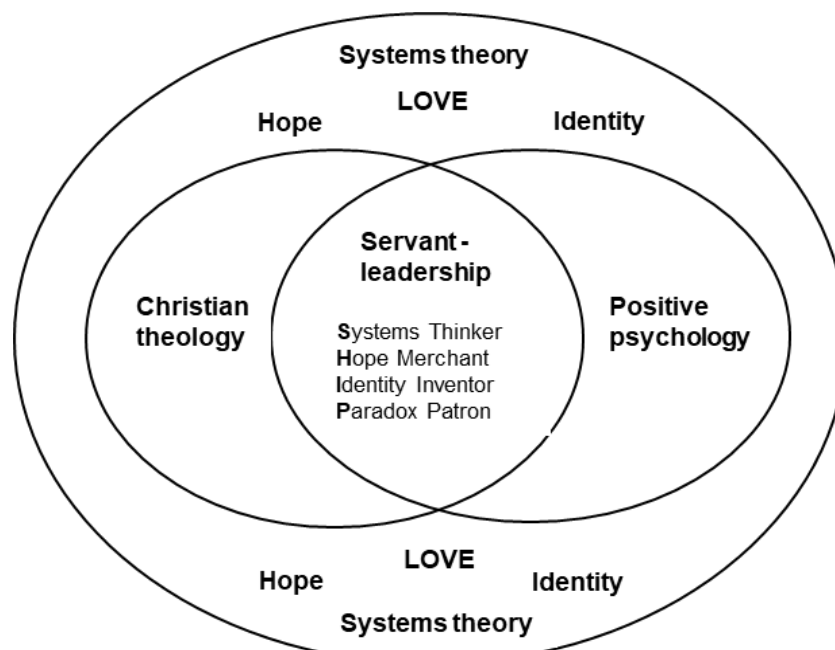


Figure 2: Integrated servant-leadership framework



### ***Systems Thinker***

A leader has to accept complexity as a constant in life (Kraljevic, 2018). Every team and every organisation has its own unique dynamics within its structures. An understanding of the interrelationships and interdependencies between these structures is necessary for a leader to recognise the “below the surface” dynamics. An emphasis on shared decision making, high levels of participation and collaboration (Cameron, 2008) builds a collective work identity and facilitates human growth and fulfilment at work.

### ***Hope Merchant***

Hope is deeply embedded in systems theory, Christian theology and positive psychology. A leader has to influence followers using their positive influence, power and authority by offering hope. The traditional assumptions of hope are individualistically orientated but recent discourses illuminate hope as relational (Cameron & Spreitzer, 2012). Furthermore, in the past, to define hope, former hope theorists focused on goal attainment while more recent research highlights the open-endedness of a system (Cameron & Spreitzer, 2012). Cameron and Spreitzer (2012) are of the opinion that while a future orientation in organisations contributes to the attainment of specified outcomes and targets, an openness to new possibilities and unarticulated horizons of expectations allows for richer experiences and wider opportunities, possibly articulating into greater value propositions and market share.

### ***Identity Inventor***

Leaders should be more concerned about what they can build, create and contribute than what they can acquire in the form of fame, fortune and power (Collins, 2001). The understanding of a leader’s identity formation may be further enhanced by integrating both systems and positive psychology theories to illuminate how positive developmental cycles occur in leadership development. As a mentor and role model a servant leader may influence the identity of a follower to find a new meaning or purpose or become a leader at work.

### ***Paradox Patron***

Great leaders embrace paradox. The author of the current study asserts that optimised leadership performance is inherently paradoxical. While leadership involves attending to and engaging in paradoxical demands, integrative thinking is a creative ability and is one way in which leaders can use paradox constructively (Lusher, 2019). Providing a solution is not about finding a choice between contradictions but rather making a choice within the contradiction (Lusher, 2019:125).

Consequently, the four roles as depicted in the framework, embedded within the concepts of *hope*, *identity* and *love*, are demonstrated in the case of Dr Catherine Hamlin in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia (adapted from BCC News, retrieved on 20 March 2020).

### **Servant leadership in practice: Doctor Catherine Hamlin**

No one came to meet Doctor Catherine Hamlin the day she arrived at a tiny airport in Ethiopia in 1959. More than 60 years later, the news of the Australian gynaecologist’s death at the age of 96 was met with an outpouring of grief in the country she had made her home (BBC News, 2020).

That is because the work Doctor Hamlin – along with her late husband, Reginald – transformed and, in some cases, saved the lives of tens of thousands of women who had





been cast out of their communities. Treating obstetric fistulas – a preventable injury sustained in childbirth that leaves women incontinent and can lead to other infections – would become her life's work. The condition occurs as a result of obstructed labour causing a hole in the bladder and/or bowel. The patient constantly leaks urine and/or faeces. However, the condition is entirely preventable and treatable. Two million women live with the condition globally, mostly in sub-Saharan Africa and South Asia. Without help, many die. Those who survive are left with injuries that leave them incontinent. In Ethiopia many were left with a deep sense of shame. They found themselves banished to the outskirts of their communities, abandoned by their husbands. The stigma and social isolation led some to end their lives (cited in BBC News, 2020).

"These are the women most to be pitied in the world," Dr Hamlin told the *New York Times*. "They're alone in the world, ashamed of their injuries. For lepers, or Aids victims, there are organisations that help. But nobody knows about these women or helps them. We felt we would like to do something to help people in the world, because we had had so many advantages."

Dr. Hamlin knew it was both fixable and preventable – as she told Ethiopia's then ruler, Haile Selassie. He said, "why do my women get this terrible thing where they can't control their body waste?" Dr. Hamlin told the BBC. "We said, 'it is nothing to do with your women, it is to do with your lack of doctors in the countryside when they need to have a Caesarean section'." (cited in BBC News, 2020).

Mamitu Gashe was one of the women whom Dr. Hamlin and her husband, also a medical practitioner, treated in the early days when they worked at Princess Teshai Hospital. It was 1962 and Mamitu had suffered a fistula giving birth to her first child. It was a three-day labour and the baby did not survive. Like so many other women in Ethiopia, she was left incontinent. But she had a sister in the capital and her family took her to the city to find help. It was then they discovered the Hamlins' specialist ward. "As soon as I arrived there, they treated me with compassion and I started to feel much better," Mamitu told the BBC after she was named one of the BBC's 100 Women 2018. "They told me that I was not the only one suffering from this, that other women had this. As soon as they said that, I felt hopeful, I felt so happy." (BBC News, 2020)

But the Hamlins not only repaired the damage; they also gave Mamitu – who has no formal education – a new career: she is now an internationally respected fistula surgeon, having been taught by the Hamlins. "I couldn't read or write," she explained in 2018. "Everything I knew, I knew from the Hamlins." Mamitu was one of the staff members the Hamlins took to Addis Ababa Fistula Hospital when it opened in 1974. And so, Dr. Hamlin continued her fight for the women of Ethiopia to the end. In 2018, Ethiopia's Nobel Prize-winning Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed handed her a prestigious citizenship award. Then, in January 2019, she celebrated her 96th birthday. Mamitu was by her side.

Dr. Hamlin died on 18 March 2019 at her home in Addis Ababa, the place she made her home. She left behind her son, grandchildren and a dream she wants others to fulfil in her memory through the continuation of service and a servant-consciousness of *passing it on*, as expressed in her last words to Mamitu (as cited in BBC News, 2020).

My dream is to eradicate obstetric fistula. Forever. I won't do this in my lifetime, but you can in yours.



## Conclusion

Theological theories focus on the way God works in the world while psychological theories focus on the workings of God's world. The consequence of specialist knowledge is speciality barriers and isolated patterns of information. The metaphor of drilling holes in a wall of mystery is relevant here. As scholars, we are drilling holes in many locations on a wall we call reality, conducting analyses on each site. Instead of a continuous and coherent picture we are getting fragments. In this study, the author aimed to connect the "holes" (various theories) with one another for a more coherent insight into what there is in the wall (servant leadership).

It is clear that the concepts of *love*, *hope* and *identity*, applied as a systems thinking paradigm, connect concepts relevant in Christian theology and psychology and thus present a conceptual framework for an understanding of servant leadership.

As scholars we may come to a fork in the road where psychology veers off in one direction and Christian theology diverges in another. While this is already true of the two theoretical paradigms to some extent, efforts to integrate them may enhance an understanding of both and lead to new knowledge and discoveries. Explicit articulations from Athens (knowledge from human reason) and Jerusalem (knowledge from Christian faith) may contribute to comprehensive and deep insights and understanding of leadership and human behaviour. "The way we read God's books will either lead us to revere our Author or to worship one of His creatures. Thus, one aim of integration should be simply and profoundly to stand in awe of, and to worship our Creator" (Entwistle, 2015:251).

To conclude, an extract from the Second letter to Timothy by Paul, summarises the stance of the author:

Every part of Scripture is God-breathed and useful one way or another – showing us the truth, exposing our rebellion, correcting our mistakes, training us to live God's way. Through the Word we are put together and shaped up for the tasks God has for us (2 Timothy 3:16-17).

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