Religious belief, spirituality and coaching for leadership development in our emergent world

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Dedication

To my life partner Anne who has been a constant nurturer and supporter of my own crossing of many knowledge boundaries and their personal integration ‘within the self’ in search of truth, sound ethics, and professional service.

The prevalence of religious belief systems and their impact in our global world cannot be ignored in leadership development by leaders and their coaches. This paper focuses on their role in the reflective space for developing leadership. What is missing is a rationale for this engagement in contexts characterised by secular pluralism. The debates about appropriate education concerning religions in secular, pluralist, multicultural societies have clearly shown that there is no such thing as value-free or neutral education; the role of the teacher and indeed of the curriculum is to facilitate a deep engagement in personal awareness and integration on the one hand, and the capacity to engage with diverse and complex meaning, social and organisational systems on the other hand. Drawing on these rich educational methodologies and knowledge domains, a conceptual framework for coaching for leadership development is described which incorporates diverse religious belief systems, and how these may be appropriately incorporated in the coaching reflective space. This framework is then illustrated by reference to the central belief of the Christian tradition when personally entertained by the coach, namely the doctrine of the Holy Trinity. A description is provided of how such coach beliefs likely express themselves in, and indeed shape, the reflective space between coach and coachee in professional practice. Observations are made about linkages between such religious beliefs, the nature of authority, and theories of leadership. Through this extended theory of coaching, researchers and coaches are challenged to engage in systematic critical reviews of the world views of the coach and how these might manifest themselves in their coaching, and coaching for leadership development in particular. It is necessary for the leadership coach in our emergent global world to acknowledge their own spirituality, beliefs and world views – whether they be labelled ‘religious’ or not.

Key words: Leadership, coaching, religion, spirituality, frameworks

THE PROBLEMATIC OF ‘RELIGION’ AND ‘SPIRITUALITY’ IN LEADERSHIP

There is ample evidence that religion is a powerful force – for good or ill – in the world today. Atrocities are committed in its name, but it also shapes the world views of most of the peoples of this precious blue-green planet. Of course religion comes in so many forms – some ‘primitive’ and indoctrinatory; others sophisticated, humanising and energising; some at war with science and others able to encompass science.

To speak of religion in secular and pluralist societies like Australia and many other so called ‘secular’ western countries can be problematic. However, the view adopted here is that pluralist and multicultural societies require a more sophisticated form of engagement with the phenomena of religion: to attempt to banish it to the periphery of public life reinforces the very sectarianism to which secular western societies are opposed.

Religious traditions as an organic social phenomenon may be understood as an example of a wider category of social traditions which contain loose and/or highly structured enduring organisational systems and cultures, typically associated with eight aspects of phenomena. They

1 Beliefs, myths and stories, texts, social structure, rituals, signs and symbols, ethics, shared personal experience and spirituality.
may be described as ‘symbol systems expressing and disclosing patterns of meaning, beliefs, values and behaviours’ (Elliott & Engebretson 2001; Elliott and Tuohy, 2006).

Social traditions can take religious or non-religious forms, depending on just how one defines religion. Belief in a God or gods is not necessarily a criterion which defines religion, as an examination of Aboriginal or major varieties of Buddhism illustrates. More compelling criteria for the identification of a social tradition as ‘religious’ are whether it is concerned with ultimate issues regarding life and death, and whether it provides a framework or orientation for patterns of meaning for the whole of life (Elliott, 1986a; Fromm, 1967).

Figure 1. Social and religious traditions

Understood in this way a dialogue between ‘religious’ and ‘non-religious’ social traditions in relation to western secular societies can be established based on rationality and enquiry about evidence (refer Figure 1). One field where these questions have had to be thoroughly investigated is in the realm of education. The educational philosopher Phillip Phenix (1954-1988) considered religious knowledge and awareness to be one of six ‘ways of knowing’ and argued that induction into all six were essential for the task of education in society. The exhaustive studies of world religions by the phenomenologist Ninian Smart along with social anthropologists like Margaret Mead and Mercia Eliade and many others provide a rich tapestry for enquiry about religion from a world perspective as one important way of knowing.

Progressive curriculum developers within western societies like Michael Grimmitt (1973, 1978) pioneered the incorporation of religious ways of knowing, skills and methods of enquiry purely in the name of education without any indoctrinatory or confessional intent. Eric Fromm (1967), writing about psychoanalysis and religion, observed forms of religion which promoted humanistic values for society and contrasted these with forms of religion which promoted forms of authoritarianism. Developmental theorists like Piaget and Kegan have provided life stage maps for achieving maturity by which different forms of integration of ‘the self’ and ‘the other’ are achieved in personal development during a life cycle.

Reviewing this rich heritage from religious studies, philosophy, social and personal psychology, education and sociology it is a great pity that such pathways to a deeper and broader understanding are not more widely accessed in contemporary life. This paper seeks to make a contribution towards the clarification of such conceptual and methodological bridges, with particular reference to coaching for leadership development.

To speak of religion and leadership together seems to invite many conundrums! While religion has largely been relegated to the domain of the local community, the private realm in secular western societies (Berger & Luckmann, 1966), the importance of leadership is widely accepted in society, in government, in corporate life, in government departments, in cultural matters as well as in religious institutions. Leadership is about the exercise of power and resources. It is about the creation of the future through a change process. Leadership is about how leaders influence others, and the outcomes which result.

There has been considerable scientific empirical research about various forms of ‘effective’ and ‘ineffective leadership’ (for a review see Bass and Bass, 2008, Parts III and IV). Despite commonly held beliefs that leaders are born not made, the evidence is otherwise (ibid, p. 1067-87, 1105-1122). As is the case with religion, confusion about what is
actually meant by ‘good leadership’ is widespread. Every person has an opinion about what constitutes effective leadership but from the viewpoint of scientific evidence about leadership and associated outcomes, some notions about leadership are better than others judged by individual, group and organisational performance criteria (for example, Barling, Weber & Kelloway, 1996; Keller, 1995; Kirkbridge, 2006; Dumdum, Lowe & Avolio, 2003).

Spirituality
In some distinction from western society’s program to relegate religion to the merely private realms of domestic and local community, spirituality as a topic of enquiry today is becoming mainstream. Spirituality has many meanings and indeed it can also be difficult to define. Generically it refers to the way that we ‘are’ (as distinct from what we do or have, although these maybe connected (Kurtz and Ketcham, 2002). Spirituality is essentially about the ‘inner self’ but it can have an outer orientation to the ‘other’ beyond the ‘self’, which in fact can serve to define and locate the ‘self’. Spirituality has been described as ‘a central part of being human, a source and a response to the cry of the human heart – the cry for more, the cry for meaning’ (de Vries, 2007, p.14). Like religion, spirituality makes claims to be about realities which shape ultimate human meaning.

The recent pre-occupation with spirituality in the West may be understood as part of a quest for personal self-transcendence – a connection to a greater reality which provides a basis of being human. Discussion of the spirituality of leaders and of spirituality at work is therefore more acceptable than religion in secular western societies. Yet the religious traditions of the world promote a spiritual dimension of personhood, encounters with the sacred and the establishment of ultimate patterns of meaning which seek to define and constitute what it means to be human (Grimmott, 1983; Elliott, 1986b; Elliott and Tuohy, 2006, p152; Moore and Habel, 1982).

How can leaders today entertain a broad global vision and still achieve the resilience sufficient to sustain them for the journey, without succumbing to cynicism of despair, indulgent hedonism, the denials of utopianism, consumerism and greed? The resources of personal spirituality and the spiritual dimension of religious traditions should not be ruled out of this leadership journey. How to access them helpfully and appropriately is the issue.

Acceptable frameworks for personal growth in coaching
In the face of a myriad of complexities in professional practice with coaching clients, having a clear framework for professional practice is like having a map and a compass. Lane and Corrie (2009) have helpfully suggested that such frameworks in general are ‘fit for their purpose’ in coaching if they:

1. **assume a partnership framework which accommodates a variety of stakeholder positions:** ‘Are consistent with a client partnership framework incorporating a variety of stakeholder positions’

2. **are inclusive of a broad range of factors:** ‘Take account of a broad range of factors beyond the individual and internal’

3. **are applicable to diverse contexts:** ‘Have relevance to contexts regardless of the goals chosen, theoretical position adopted or techniques for change used’ (Lane and Corrie, 2009).

Accepting this lead, it is here proposed that these three criteria need to be satisfied by any conceptual framework dedicated to enabling effective coaching for leadership development which includes attention to personal spirituality and the spiritual dimension of world religious traditions.

**TOWARDS A COMPREHENSIVE FRAMEWORK FOR LEADERSHIP DEVELOPMENT COACHING**

Our starting point is the situation of engagement between coach and client/coachee in the context of an organisational setting. Building on a series of practitioner presentations developed through naturalistic methods and critical peer review about coaching at evidence-based national conferences (Elliott & Long, 2004, 2006), and reflecting on his own career journey in physics, education, theology, psychology, ethics and philosophy, the author developed and presented a conceptual framework for leadership development – the zone of professional practice in coaching for leadership development (Elliott, 2007a, 2007b). Among other things, this framework highlighted the importance of critical examination of the assumptions which the coach brings to the coaching relationship and how their own beliefs and values may shape the coaching reflective space.

Figure 2 is an extract from this framework.
A central concern was the appropriate use and incorporation of scientific theories about what has been shown to be effective leadership in coaching intended for leadership development. From the viewpoint of professional practice it was observed that the evidence-based journal literature of coaching on the one hand, and the scholarly leadership literature on the other, were simply not engaging with each other about leadership development. This situation continues to be the case as was further elaborated in a paper delivered at the International Congress of Applied Psychology (Elliott, 2010) in which it was suggested that the new field of coaching, and specifically coaching psychology, had experienced premature closure due to a lack of critical reflection about the foundation assumptions on which the domain is based.

The question at hand here is how can and should conceptual frameworks for leadership development be further developed to enable religion, philosophy and spirituality to be systematically considered in the professional coaching practice in any organisational or societal context?

Addressing gaps in conceptual frameworks for coaching

What is missing so far in empirical research about coaching are frameworks which promote rational, open enquiry across the boundaries currently separating religion, spirituality and leadership. In the pursuit of coaching for leadership and management development, inclusive frameworks are required which serve to draw upon and integrate the vast riches of received religious and spiritual wisdom as well as established scientific leadership theories. These frameworks need to facilitate the responsible exploration of the religious (or non-religious) beliefs and spirituality of both coach and coachee in the enterprise of developing leadership capability for this emergent and complex global world.

Considering the areas of leadership, religion and spirituality in coaching practice, any concern with ‘ultimate realities’ is surely challenging territory for the present theory and practice for coaching as the following questions illustrate:

- What is the place of any revealed ‘truth’ or ‘knowledge’ in the coaching reflective space – whether from the coach, coachee or sponsoring organisation?

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1 For instance, the text *The handbook of coaching psychology: A guide for practitioners* by Palmer and Whybrow (2007) omits any treatment of 80 years of empirical leadership research, even though surveys indicate that over one-third of all coaching in organisations purports to be about leadership development.
• What are the appropriate hermeneutics for any interpretation of these for coachee development?

• If the coach him/herself entertains religious beliefs and values, how might they drive or influence their own practice of coaching?

• Under what circumstances, if any, is it appropriate for such religious beliefs to be disclosed to the client? Indeed, are there ethical requirements to actively disclose them if informed consent is to be achieved in such coaching relationships?

• Is it ever justifiable or authentic for a coach to claim they have no beliefs, values or world views which need such disclosure, as is often claimed by secularists and humanists?

• Can some world views in fact function like a ‘religion’ in a person and for an organisation even though they are not named as ‘religious’?

Accordingly, in search of useful conceptual bridges which satisfy the three criteria of Lane and Corrie (2009), we now consider some of the best curriculum rationales yet devised in secular pluralist societies concerning how beliefs, values and meaning might be impartially explored and developed in the enquirer through the dialogical encounter with both religious and non-religious social traditions.

The quest for a more comprehensive conceptual framework for coaching is facilitated by the adoption of phenomenological methods of scientific enquiry (Grimmitt, 1973, 1978; Smart and Horder, 1975). Such enquiries for the handling of religion(s) assist in understanding how human religious experience can be appropriately accommodated in the reflective space of coaching for leadership in secular pluralist societies.

Contributions from ‘New RE’ curriculum theory
The 1970s and 1980s were a very fertile period in the field of religious education (RE). A vibrant national professional dialogue occurred within Australia (Elliott and Rossiter, 1982; Mavor et al., 1982; Minister of Education, 1984; Moore and Habel, 1982; Rossiter, 1981) and internationally – the United Kingdom (Grimmitt, 1983; Hull, 1982). Questions and issues canvassed included the following:

• What is the place of religion, if any, in the curriculum of public sector, secular, sponsored, pluralist education?

• How can enquiry and indeed achievement concerning religious belief systems be legitimately handled and assessed in reliable, public, impartial, credentialing processes?

• What is the role of the educator in this domain of religious education? Can a clear distinction be made between ‘education in a religion’ and ‘education concerning or about religion(s)’?

• Can the pitfalls of comparative religion approaches be avoided? What is the vision for the educated person involved in such educational pursuits?

Building on the prodigious work of the phenomenologist Ninian Smart in the study of religious traditions world-wide (for example, Smart & Horder, 1975), Michael Grimmitt made a most important contribution to the field of religious education in his widely used and cited book ‘What can I do in RE?’ (1973, 1978). In this he reviewed the implications of Smart’s phenomenological method and accounts of religion for education in schools and proposed a three-circle map for the field of enquiry – ‘personal religious/moral dimension of experience’, ‘shared human experience’ and ‘particular stances for living’ (the enquirer). Grimmitt incorporated Ninian Smart’s six dimensions of religion in his conceptual framework for the curriculum for the new RE in all schools. This conceptualisation for the field of enquiry for RE in schools cut it loose from confessional intent pre-occupations and enabled serious consideration of RE as a necessary area of any curriculum in its own right. Similarly, John Hull (1982) made many fine contributions describing and scoping the new field of RE.

The vigorous Australian national curriculum discussions about the nature and place of religion in society’s general education led to several proposals about what ‘religion’ is and how to study it (Cheers & Elliott, 1982; Elliott, 1986a, 1986b; Hill, 1983; Mavor et al., 1982; Moore & Habel, 1982; Rossiter, 1981). One influential approach was that of typology (Basil Moore and Norman Habel) which posited eight classifications of typical aspects of religions, not six as in the phenomenology of Ninian Smart. Elliott (1986a), drawing on the analysis provided by the typologists but maintaining a phenomenological, not a typological approach, proposed eight ‘aspects of religious traditions’ for the religious tradition circle in the field of enquiry.
for the new RE in education. He also drew on and incorporated analyses about the role of the educator/teacher in the overall curriculum as proposed by Brian Hill (1983), namely the possibility of critical impartiality in curriculum practice. Elliott also extended Hill’s concepts to include principles of selection for the content of sequential curriculums for the new impartial and critical RE in schools (Elliott, 1986a, 1986b, 1988, 1990).

To ensure differentiation was possible between ‘Education in faith’ orientations and ‘Education concerning religion(s)’ orientations, Elliott located the enquirer in a ‘Me Circle’ which had as its core understanding ‘symbol sets’ about patterns of meaning and belief for the individual which corresponded to the ‘symbol-systems’ of social traditions. The basic distinction in the approach of these confessional and impartial orientations is represented in Figure 3.

**Figure 3. Three areas for ‘Education concerning religion(s)’**

![TWO ORIENTATIONS FOR EDUCATION CONCERNING RELIGION](image)

The individual student, and indeed, all enquirers in the curriculum, was not assumed to be ‘in’ the circle of religion but engaging with it – informed by the methods of phenomenological research and enquiry. This proposal for RE fitted well with the needs of public education for the ‘informed but impartial enquiry’ about multiple religious systems. These principles for curriculum design in RE became embedded in the Victorian Certificate of Education in a new course ‘Religion and Society’ which still continues today as a serious field of study in senior secondary education leading to public (not confessional) certification.

**Implications of the ‘New RE’ curriculum theory for coaching**

Taken as a system this journey in the field of religious education (Elliott, 1986b, 1987, 1989, 1990, 1991a, 1991b, 1992; Rossiter, 1981; Elliott & Rossiter, 1982) has a number of implications for coaching in pluralist contexts when religious beliefs are being entertained in the coaching reflective space. These include the following insights:

- There are two basic orientations for engagement with religious traditions: (a) education in faith and (b) education concerning religions (Elliott, 1986, 1988, 1989; Elliott & Rossiter, 1982; Rossiter, 1981). The latter is marked not by neutrality and a false objectivity but by developing the capacity to ‘stand in the shoes of a person of faith’ and seek understanding from their perspective whilst also maintaining a critical independence. This extends the scope and kind of empathy necessary in the coach if they are to avoid practising undisclosed indoctrination or being a missionary for their own implicit belief system (whether that be about religion or leadership, for example).
- The context for enquiry is crucial in deciding whether the confessional
‘education in faith’ orientation or the impartial ‘education concerning religion(s)’ is ethically mandated as being appropriate. (For a discussion of this distinction in orientations see Elliott & Tuohy, 2006, p.145-148.)

- This distinction in orientation requires awareness and consideration of the stance of the coach, the stance of the coachee, and assumptions of the context in which the reflective space of coaching occurs. A number of possibilities arise from combinations of these three areas of consideration, each of which has implications for: (a) whether expert knowledge and skill of a particular kind is required in the coach, (b) the coachee’s interest, needs and aspirations, and the assumptions they bring to coaching regarding their own religious beliefs or world views, and (c) implications for the coaching contract and purpose scope from the viewpoint of any sponsoring organisation.

- Religious beliefs are considered in the total context of all the associated phenomena of a religious tradition, so beliefs, including those entertained by an individual, need to be grounded in seven other aspects of any religious tradition: myths and stories (narratives); ethics and codes for acceptable behaviour; texts, both foundational (sacred) and authoritative commentaries; rituals; symbols; social structure (about related social organisations and institutions which support maintenance of religious systems of thought and practice); and the subjective personal experience of the adherents of a religious tradition.

All seven aspects contribute to the meaning of religious beliefs and their functioning in social and individual personal life. Conversely, to examine beliefs divorced or disassociated from the wider context is to unhelpfully subject religious belief to a radical reductionism and misinterpretation.

Figure 4. Personal religious beliefs of the coach and professional coaching processes
The conceptual framework shown in Figure 4 outlines the social context for religious beliefs as these may be entertained by the coach. To appreciate the total meaning of such beliefs, the seven individual ‘aspects of the religious tradition’ are relevant for consideration. Then the orientation of the individual to those aspects is important — namely, to what extent do they identify with and adopt these perspectives? Do they place themselves ‘in’ the particular ‘religious tradition’ circle or outside it — or sometimes a bit of both?

As presented by Elliott (2005, 2007a, 2007b), three core processes are understood to establish and maintain the coaching reflective space:

- Coach expert – facilitative modalities
- Self-other belief and value interactions, and
- Coachee informed consent and accommodation.

Collectively these three driver processes in professional coaching operate to make explicit the content, methods and assumptions being entertained in the reflective space.

By virtue of the very scope of the field of enquiry of the new RE, fundamental questions of life and death, of ultimate meaning about existence are to the fore when considered in a coaching relationship.

One effect of this broadened scope of engagement is an extension of the range of considerations normally associated with issues of authority in the coaching reflective space. The New RE field of enquiry systematically focuses attention on matters of truth regarding what may be considered to be ultimate authorities. Consequently, any extensions of leadership coaching into spirituality or religious traditions will likely be associated with the creation of specific awareness about the nature and role of authority in any leadership theory when such theories are also applied in coaching for development. The developmental purposes of coaching will be furthered when the reflective space includes consideration of how a spiritual or religious belief system (whether of coach, coachee or organisation sponsor) might influence the selection of leadership theories or indeed shape them in actual practice.

The conceptual framework for coaching is extended beyond any isolated individualism since the field of enquiry of the new RE grounds religious beliefs in manifestations of the seven aspects of religious traditions and firmly includes society, shared human experience and cultural analysis and sensitivity.

Finally, given that religious traditions may be defined in the new RE field of enquiry as ‘symbol systems explaining and expressing patterns of meaning, beliefs, values, purpose and behaviour’ for societies and individuals (Elliott, 2006), the associated conceptuality heightens the issue of meaning in personal relationships and relatedness to others and to ‘otherness’ in general.

(Elliott 1989, 1990; Elliott & Tuohy, 2005) defined the beliefs aspect of social and religious traditions as ‘ideas that people and groups have about their basic assumptions concerning human nature and what is “real” in the physical world and cosmos’.)

Figure 5. Impacts of religious beliefs/social traditions in the reflective space of coaching
Given these contributions from the field of religious education, the reflective space for coaching with regard to the place of religious beliefs may be depicted as in Figure 5. Utilising the expert lens schemas for leadership and religious traditions (see also Figures 2, 8 and 9) the coach may then facilitate reflection by the coachee of the interpretation of any religious beliefs in the coaching processes and their impacts on either the implicit or scientific theories of leadership being entertained. Moreover, when spiritual or religious beliefs are held by the coach the conceptual framework prompts professional reflection (and indeed review) of how these coach beliefs may influence coaching for leadership development with the coachee.

It is here proposed that such extensions of the conceptual framework for leadership coaching proposed satisfy the three criteria advanced by Lane and Corrie (2009), namely:

- Does the extension framework envisage a partnership relationship between practitioner and client which is consistent with a variety of stakeholder positions? Yes.
- Is the extension framework inclusive of a broad range of factors? Yes.
- Is the framework applicable to diverse contexts and techniques? Yes.

APPLYING AN EXPANDED CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK FOR LEADERSHIP COACHING INFORMED BY RELIGION AND SPIRITUALITY

In the emergent evidence-based literature (for example, Palmer & Whybrow, 2006; Whybrow & Palmer, 2006; Grant, 2007) coaching is differentiated from counselling, training, education and consulting (Grant, 2001, 2006). Coaching is regarded as an activity understood to be a systematic engagement between two individuals (here referred to as coach and coachee) for the purpose of improving the realisation of the coachee’s personal goals and enhanced performance outcomes (for example, Grant & Cavanagh, 2002; Grant, Cavanagh & Kemp, Eds, 2005); Green & Grant, 2003; Kilburg, 2004; Whitmore, 1992; Zeus & Skiffington, 2000). Coaching is concerned with current realities and present personal functioning with a view to achieving a future preferred state of acts and being by the coachee. Any focus on the past or history is only for the sake of the present purpose of self-actualisation.

Coaching is frequently used for management and executive development in organisations in western societies. While ‘leadership’ is clearly an important aspect of what executives, managers and team leaders are expected to provide, interpretations of what leadership means vary widely. Elliott (2003, 2005) first drew attention to the absence of evidence-based interpretative theories about effective leadership in coaching dedicated to developing leadership. He advanced seven propositions for responsible professional coaching about leadership development, which included the need for a proper utilisation of scientifically established leadership theories.

The burgeoning coaching industry is driven by many client requirements and service offerings, but surveys indicate that up to a half of all coaching services purport to be about leadership development. Yet in in the coaching literature, including the professional literature in coaching journals, one cannot find systematic attempts to define leadership or effective leadership, let alone validated measures of these.

As has been the case with scientifically established theories about leadership, religion and spirituality have so far been ignored in the serious empirical coaching literature. Considered along with the lack of engagement with the scientific leadership literature, one wonders whether the emergent coaching field has experienced premature closure (Elliott, 2010).

ILLUSTRATION OF AN EXPANDED CONCEPTUALITY FOR COACHING

The application of an expanded conceptual framework for leadership development that is inclusive of religious beliefs and spirituality will be considered here by addressing two questions:

A. By way of illustration, how might core personal coach Christian belief in the Trinity shape the reflective space of coaching and do so legitimately?

B. How can, and perhaps should, any religious, spiritual and scientific knowledge and awareness be handled and utilised in professional coaching practice?

Trinitarian Christian belief and coaching for leadership development

The doctrine of the Holy Trinity is regarded as central to mainstream Christianity; discussions concerning it have provided a forum and vehicle for clarifying and even defining mainstream variants
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within the Christian tradition, such as the Western Catholic, Anglican, Protestant and various Eastern Orthodox traditions.

Colin Gunton writes (1997) citing Professor Christoph Schwobel’s *Trinitarian Theology Today* (1995):

Trinitarian theology appears to be a summary label for doing theology that affects all aspects of the enterprise of doing theology in its various disciplines … This concerns not only major doctrinal topics such as the doctrine of Creation, the destiny of humankind, the person and work of Christ, the church, its members and sacraments, and eschatology, but all those areas where doctrinal reflection and non-theological modes of inquiry overlap, such as conversation with the natural sciences, anthropological enquiries, historical investigation and social theory.

Some historical and theological background concerning the doctrine of the Trinity within Christianity is provided in the Appendix.

Figure 6. Reviewing impacts of coach religious beliefs on the coaching reflective space and coachee

Addressing Question A and using the extended conceptual framework for the reflective space (Figures 5 and 6) it is proposed that core personal Christian beliefs in the Trinity held by the coach can shape:

- the reflective space boundaries
- the content considered relevant to value and belief formation for personal leadership development
- the coaching processes of the reflective space
- the coachee’s implicit leadership theories and their self-perception of their leadership behaviours
- the key assumptions made about the relationship between coach and coachee, and
- how scientific theories about leadership are entertained and evaluated.

How this is so for each of these will be considered in turn, with illustrative reference to the content and meaning of the doctrine of the Trinity within the Christian tradition.

The origins of Trinitarian theological thinking lie
within the spirituality of communal Christian worship. However, the content of these beliefs relate to other domains including ‘creation’, the nature of the Church, the vast universe, the nature and purpose of life, the destiny of humanity, the person and work of Christ, and the sacraments of the Church – principally baptism and Eucharistic worship. The seven phenomenological aspects of the Christian tradition are the canvas on which Trinitarian beliefs may be understood as providing essential truth about existence and its meaning.

Figure 7. The possibility of confessional coaching given acceptance of shared coach and coachee religious world views

In the coaching relationship the extent to which coach and coachee may share this world view will of course vary greatly. Where the relationship of a shared Trinitarian world view exists coaching will take the form of catechesis or ‘education in the Christian faith’, the possibility of which is suggested in Figure 7. However, to illustrate the coaching framework here we shall assume that only the coach holds such commitments and that coaching is taking place in a context characterised by secular pluralism.

Some observations can be made about implications of Trinitarian thought for the coaching relationship:

- The development of personhood as attributes of the divine was the contribution of the Cappadocian Fathers (Gunton, 1997, page 94). There is a perfect relationship between the three persons of the Divine life ontologically (as pertaining to be-ing or existence) and functionally (as pertaining to actions between existing entities/persons) speaking.

- The Orthodox theologian John Zizioulas (1985) writes that relationship is not based on the superiority of one and subordination of another (for example, Father and Son) but in a complete mutuality of being, purpose and act. Humans can be ‘caught up into this Divine mystery’ and achieve participation in the Divine Life. Zizioulas (2006), proposes that ‘fear of the other is pathologically inherent in our existence ... and it results in fear not only of the other but of all otherness.’ He asserts that The Person of the Son (ontology) of the Divine Trinity represents all ‘otherness’ for humans. But he also asserts that ‘otherness’ is constitutive of unity: ‘God is simultaneously one and three’. Moreover
‘otherness is absolute’ in the sense that the three Persons of the Trinity ‘are absolutely different’. He insists that ‘otherness is ontological’ and not a moral or psychological attribute (p.5).

The conception of the Person of the Son as representing in human terms ‘the other’ provides a powerful symbolism which transforms perceptions of all human relationships. The conception of the Holy Spirit which indwells in all particular others establishes communion through generating the relationships of Persons, including the entire evolving creation/universe of the Father. These themes of persons, otherness, distinctness, relationship and communion have important implications for the aspirational qualities of the reflective space in coaching generally.

If human leadership is modelled on the Divine Life the dynamic of love must be central to relationships; dominance or mere submission are anathema. Consequently authoritarian leadership styles are unacceptable in the coach. Rather, styles devoted to development of persons are comprehensively endorsed. True leadership, in Trinitarian understanding, is the enactment of serving love: of becoming ‘as one’ with ‘the other’ in empathy and purpose to raise both into the divine economy of sanctification (holiness).

Coach belief that ‘Personhood within the Trinity’ is absolutely differentiated and that yet ‘otherness’ is constituted by communion has many derivatives and implications for the coaching relationship. Systematic loving initiatives through relationship which builds communion mirror the divine initiatives towards humanity. Such interpretations in the reflective space are signs of ‘The Holy’: they can have revelatory character. From this coach perspective (refer to Figure 8), adoration of, and incorporation into, the Divine Holy Trinity is the ultimate purpose of human existence. Worship within the Holy Trinity redefines the meaning of all human being and action.

For the coachee in this illustrative coaching situation this pattern of meaning will be opaque, unless accessed through the coaching processes involving disclosure by the coach: (a) on the condition of informed consent by the coachee and (b) if consistent with the agreed purposes of the relationship.

Figure 8. Coach Trinitarian belief impacts as interpreted through Trinitarian interpretative lens
Trinitarian belief provides a number of correlates which may be inferred or deduced (Chalmers, 2007, page 54) when considered with reference to the conceptual framework for coaching for leadership development. When such a ‘world view’ is accepted and enacted by the coach the correlates of such belief can be expected to shape the coaching process and outcomes of the reflective space.

We can now suggest some possible answers to questions (a to f):

(a) The reflective space boundaries are extended to:

- locate the reflective space as participating in the divine economy of transforming naked or unfiltered human consciousness to a higher state of ecological and integrated societal consciousness;
- prompt contemplation of the vast and complex universe as the backdrop for the conversation, thereby fostering critical distancing of the imagination in the coach.

(b) Relevant content for value and belief formation in leadership development:

- ranges freely across both positive and negative human experiences avoiding the denial of one of these polarities;
- views the mission of leadership against an ecological consciousness and necessary connectedness to this planet in consequence of the self-other imperatives for communion;
- establishes an ultimate ground for hope and a positive vision for personal growth from any starting point in human experience;
- recognises the coachee as occupying the foreground of attention viewed against a background which is a vast, complex, interconnected, comprehensive, and mysterious web of a dynamic, evolving but ultimately trustable cosmic reality.

(c) Coaching processes sourced in coach skills, knowledge and the practice of applied ethics:

- allow reflective space permeability to the complexities of individual, group, organisational and environmental life;
- require value integration with self-other relationships which include this planet as part of the other which needs to be brought into communion: this is a consequent foundation for ecological consciousness and responsibility;
- actively aim for connectedness and relationship when presented with experiences of isolation, fragmentation, abandonment, powerlessness and hopelessness, through the coach’s conviction that there is no experience, no location, no time, no challenge, no relationship from which the Holy Trinity is absent.

(d) Coachee implicit beliefs and theories are assumed to be capable of being intentionally transformed, so:

- allowing the personal inner freedom of both coach and coachee: there is no aspect of ‘the self’ as ‘object’ which is beyond Personhood within the Trinity;
- enabling deep personal integration of all ‘intra- and inter-personal otherness’ to be intentionally brought into existence;
- shaping the reflective space (whether explicitly identified or not) and particular modelling of leadership.

(e) Key assumptions about coach-coachee relationship:

- recognises that ideal relationship is not based on superiority of one and subordination of another (for example, the Father and subordination of the Son) but an assumption of complete mutuality of being, purpose and act;
- whilst respecting a differentiation of role, the equality of dignity of the coach and coachee in the relationship is established and maintained;
- the theological modelling of ‘otherness’ and ‘communion’ provide a reference framework for this human relationship;
- acceptance, respectful intimacy, and engagement with even the darkest recesses of the human psyche in both
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...coach and coachee is imperative;

- the elevation of the coachee as the ‘other’, to potentially iconographic representations of ‘the holy’ is anticipated.

(f) Selection of scientific empirical theories about leadership, or interpretations of evidence which may otherwise be considered ambiguous according to the canons of rational science, may be preferred:

- based on their reasoned congruence with Trinitarian beliefs about be-ing within the Divine Life (ontology) and with the Divine Economy (purpose/ functionality);
- gives priority to leadership as the enactment of serving love: of becoming ‘as one’ with ‘the other’ in empathy and purpose, so reflecting by imitation the divine economy of sanctification (holiness);
- gives priority to actions which build communion through models of leadership which seek to imitate and mirror the divine initiatives towards humanity.

Interestingly, it turns out many of these values and modalities of coach engagement are congruent with the exercise of the scientifically derived Full Range Transformational-Transactional leadership theory which Bass (1997) and Antonakis, Avolio, and Sivasubramaniam (2003) asserted seemed to have universal validity given the extensive empirical research undertaken over a significant period concerning it.

**Authority in coaching for leadership development: Truth claims – religion, spirituality, reason and science**

Systematic consideration of religious and spiritual experience in the coach necessarily permits exposure to revelatory states of mind and to the category ‘knowledge of revelation’ itself. The relationship between such states of mind and the exercise of reason (as indicated by Figure 9) will depend on the particular religious tradition. Authoritarian forms of religion associated with the absence of, or diminished, rational scrutiny of religious and spiritual experience is clearly capable of inflicting harm on society and personal functioning. However it is also evident that humanising types of religion can address the darkest corners of human experience and transform it into a positive force for good (Fromm, 1967). In determining whether religious belief is ‘good’ or ‘bad’ for the human psyche and society obviously depends on the nature of the revelatory knowledge received and its functioning in persons, groups and societies.

![Figure 9: Contributions and impacts of scientific leadership theories and Christian Trinitarian beliefs in coaching for leadership development](image-url)
The nature of the revelatory knowledge received concerning Christian Trinitarian belief in this paper is clearly on the side of positive humanisation. However, in coaching for leadership development, as suggested by Figure 9, both the content of philosophical or religious knowledge has to be critically scrutinised along with how such beliefs and convictions actually operate in individuals, groups, organisations and societies. The canvas on which the coach entertains their world view when revelatory states of mind are worked with is likely larger than the canvas of coaches who adamantly admit no such realities for contemplation in meaning-making. Indeed the latter coach world view can lead to the tyranny of the coach as the new god – the new ultimate pattern of meaning. Already in the little existent coaching psychology literature the coach and the coaching relationship itself seems to have replaced even the application of the extensive scientific literature on leadership as a source of authority for what constitutes good and effective leadership (Kemp, 2009).

RELIGION AND ETHICAL PRACTICE IN COACHING PROCESSES

Question B concerned the application of ethical principles involved in the reflective space which span the exploration and utilisation of world views such as religious belief systems and even scientific leadership theories.

The principle of propriety requires that coaches must ensure they are not pushing or inflicting their own agenda onto the coachee without the latter’s free informed consent. To do otherwise is to breach the developmental intent of the coach-coachee partnership. Such respect for the propriety principle and its application requires an assessment of the readiness of the coachee and their own theological/philosophical world view also depends on the stance of any sponsoring organisation party for the coaching.

Whether the assumptions of Trinitarian belief, if held by a coach, need to be disclosed up front (or indeed ever) is problematic and usually impractical. If that ethical standard were applied to all personal philosophies held by coaches it is likely that few, if any, might pass such a rigorous test. In practice it is thought that much coaching in secular, pluralist contexts is invariably negotiated without reference to such philosophical categories. Perhaps this is a reason why coach beliefs and values have received so little attention in the research literature.

Concerning such personal disclosures in professional work, two standard tests may be applied: (a) is the disclosure made in the best developmental interests of the coachee, and (b) is such disclosure necessary, and if so, why? Considerable attention has been given to such ethical issues in professional discussions about controversial religious beliefs and values in ‘education concerning religion(s)’ in schooling. On the one hand curriculum approaches grounded in the impartial (as distinct from ‘neutral’ which is impossible) exploration of a religious tradition are arguably appropriate and necessary in all educative contexts as part of the knowledge and skills necessary for citizenship in a tolerant pluralist society. On the other hand approaches grounded in educative or developmental confessional explorations are indeed only legitimate if context disclosure policies and conditions are in place which in fact enable free informed consent. ¹

Extending this discussion from the New RE to coaching in organisations for leadership development, clearly any religious evangelistic or catechetical intent in coaching for leadership development is inappropriate unless the overarching sponsor and personal contracting permits such moves given the overall agreed purpose of coaching. Consequently at what point, if any, should the coach holding Trinitarian convictions, or any other philosophy for that matter, consider whether explicitly sharing these coach core beliefs in the reflective space is in the best interests of the coachee?

Coaching must invariably and legitimately be engaged in the review of coachee beliefs and whether they are serving the higher states of personal functioning and workplace performance sought in its agreed purpose. Regardless of specific coach beliefs, professional leadership coaching in western pluralist societies for our emergent world has an educative responsibility to draw out awareness of any salient relationship with religious beliefs, values and personal spirituality with beliefs about leadership held by the coachee. An important issue, which is beyond the scope of this paper, is the kind of preparation and training required for any coach to competently navigate this extended canvas in the coaching reflective space.

¹ For an extended discussion of these issues in education, see Elliott, R.H., 1988, 1989, 1990.
The doctrine of the Holy Trinity within the Christian tradition

Trinitarian Christian belief may be considered at its simplest under two categories: functional and ontological (meaning that which is concerned with ‘being’ or ‘existence’).

The functional categories attribute the original creative principle of the vast universe to ‘The Father’; the redemptive principle for humanity is attributed to ‘The Son’; and the empowerment and the relationship principle is attributed to ‘The Holy Spirit’. Each in turn has been developed through revelatory occasions as narrated in the Old and New Testaments – either directly in prophetic utterances or mediated through social, ecclesial and textual editorial processes as accepted over time through various agreement processes by The Church. Many stories and myths (in the technical sense) give colour and meaning to these principles, such as the creation myths of Genesis, the resurrection stories of the New Testament, and the Eucharistic experience of the Church in relation to the sanctification of humanity. The three principles have been considered modalities of the one: each act in concert with the other in a perfect unity of concord.

The ‘ontological’ or being category of analysis about the Trinity enquires about the very existence of the Trinity as expressions of the one God. Again driven by the experience of Christian worship and the associated revelatory meaning states, participants are ‘caught up’ in contemplation/reflection/theological thought about the relations between the three principles not in functional or economic terms but in their very relationship to each other. After centuries of such Christian reflection the Church codified that each of the modalities of the divinity were perfectly inter-related, co-equal, co-eternal (that is without temporal priority) and, in carefully defined ways ‘Persons’.

Beyond the many creedal or belief statements embedded in the New Testament, it is in the Athanasian Creed that we find a full statement of the doctrine that ‘in the one substance (homo-ousios) of the Godhead there are three Persons’ (Burnaby, 1960, p.196). The non-biblical Greek word ‘homo-ousios’ was first used at the Council of Nicea (CE 325) of God the Son and later extended by the Council of Constantinople (CE381-2) to the whole Trinity. The three modalities or Persona by which God has become known through revelation in the economy of divine works of Father – Creation, Son – Incarnation, and Holy Spirit – Pentecost, are each present in the other. The Divine Trinity is considered to be indivisible: the Father is in the Son and the Spirit, the Son is in the Father and the Spirit, the Spirit is in the Father and the Son (ibid p.202). The Persons are differently related to one another in their being (hypostasis) as determined by their operation but they are one in their inter-penetrating unity or communion (perichoresis). These 4th century terms, metaphors and symbols were considered essential at various times to avoid heresies which denied some part of the mature Trinitarian affirmations.

Katheryn Tanner (2004) in her discussion Trinity examines the relation of this doctrine to any human relations and politics: ‘The Trinity tells us what human relations should be like ideally; the understanding of humans as creatures tells us what sort of approximation of the ideal we are in fact capable of’ (page 326-7). And then she concludes, ‘one should think of the economic Trinity as closing the gap by incorporating the human within it – first the humanity of Jesus and then, by way of him, in the power of the Spirit, other human beings in all their relatedness’ (page 328). ‘The problem of an ideal inaccessible to humans is resolved if human relations come to image Trinitarian ones as they are swept up into them, not as they become like them in and of themselves’ (page 329).

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