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The role of CEO (auto-) biographies in the dissemination of neo-ascetic leadership styles

Abstract

This paper attempts to relate the critical analysis of religious or 'sacred' metaphors in leadership to the theory of askēsis, the idea of leader as an incarnation of a virtue defined as 'the formation of a full, perfect, complete and self-sufficient relationship with oneself'. A model of leadership based on askēsis, it is argued, is established by means of the form of rhetoric called the exemplum, by means of which leaders derive authority from their being held to be a living (or dead) incarnation of an ideal of perfection, and their life being narrated as a 'perfectionist vita'. The principal means of communication of this exemplarity is the hagiography, which finds its contemporary equivalent in the popular CEO (auto-) biography, which can be interpreted as a re-activation of ancient hagiographic archetypes. In readings of 3 leader hagiographies, focusing on the narrative, rhetorical, and discursive strategies employed, it is shown how the dubious moral exemplarity of such individuals is established. The paper concludes with a discussion of the differences and analogies between the medieval hagiography and the contemporary CEO (auto-) biography, and a discussion of the relationship between asceticism and charisma in the light of these examples.

Introduction: Leadership and askēsis

In *The Hermeneutics of the Subject* Foucault (2005) defines askēsis as "the formation of a full, perfect, complete and self-sufficient relationship with oneself" (319), whose genealogy is found in the Stoics and the early Christian writers. Askēsis consists in essence of application to the self of "spiritual exercises" (Hadot 1995, 1998), mental and physical strategies by means of which the subject undergoes "phases and successive stages" of change until the perfect state of askēsis is brought about (Foucault 2005: 319). In its later Christian form, the ultimate aim of askēsis was "self-renunciation" (319) resulting in "asceticism" (Foucault 2005: 416). Asceticism as a religious practice is related to strategies of bodily denial, including sexual abstinence and fasting (Johnson 2000, Diamond 2004). A form of "inner worldly asceticism" is identified by Weber in *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* as present within early capitalism.

If asceticism, particularly in the workplace, has apparently been in decline in the modern era, recent work has identified a renaissance of it in the postmodern era (Macho 1994, Sloterdijk 2013), and this has brought about a call for an examination of mechanisms and practices of askēsis in their wider cultural significance rather than solely in religious value systems (Harpham 1987, Valantasis 1995). Sloterdijk (2013), for example, argues for a new discipline of 'anthropotechnics', the study of "the fundamental meaning of the practicing life for the development of styles of existence or 'cultures'" (33), which can be applied to the study of culture formation in contemporary organizations (Halsall and Brown 2013), and, it will be argued here, to leadership. In the field of leadership, the understanding of askēsis can contribute to a critical analysis of the means through which some leaders have attained 'exemplarity', being regarded as instantiations of a higher virtue, models of 'perfection' to be imitated.

The argument will proceed by means of a review of work on 'sacred' metaphors in leadership studies, particularly the notion of leaders as 'saints', and the related wider question of the discursive legitimation of neo-ascetic leadership models. The remainder of the paper will examine the narrative,

rhetorical, and discursive mechanisms through which ascetic leadership models are communicated, principally the rhetoric of the 'exemplum' and the narrative genre of hagiography, by means of readings of three CEO (auto-)biographies. The concluding section will discuss differences and analogies between the medieval hagiography and these contemporary examples, and the implications regarding the theory of asceticism and charisma.

Of saints, priests and messiahs: a critical review of 'sacred' metaphors in leadership studies

There have been a number of studies in the field of leadership which have used or examined metaphors associated with the religious field or the 'sacred' (Grint 2010), both as "naturally surfacing" (Cornelisson et al. 2008: 9) in communication from and surrounding leaders, such as leadership textbooks, CEO (auto)-biographies, or corporate and organizational texts (Armernic et al. 2007), and as "second order" constructs (Cornelisson et al. 2008: 9) used to explain leadership phenomena. The latter in particular relates such metaphors to the increasing prevalence of religious discourse in organizations, seen as evidence of a movement towards 'spirituality at work', a "new work ethic" (Bell and Taylor 2003) or "neo-Protestant ethic" (Casey 1995). The majority of the literature is critical regarding the prevalence of such metaphors, seeing this as related to the "dark side" of transformational leadership models (Tourish 2011, 2013).

Alvesson's (2010) examination of the 'saint' metaphor in leadership attributes its presence to the interface between leadership and "explicitly moral phenomena" (51). The 'saint' metaphor and its attribution to leaders, then, relates to the widely held belief that "a real leader is good. If he/she is bad he or she is not a leader" (Alvesson 2010: 52). 'Saint-like' qualities, such as "sacredness, purity, miracles" and "not being authoritarian" (Alvesson 2010: 53, 54), common attributes depicted in hagiographical accounts of saints' lives, are attributed to leaders, indicating an attachment to a higher purpose, and (supposed) moral superiority. The (supposed) exemplarity or moral authority of the 'saint'/leader is, however, Alvesson argues, deeply ambivalent: the ability of the saintly exemplar to create identification among followers can result in it being regarded as illegitimate to query "any aspect of the vision" (Alvesson 2010: 67), the resultant organizational cultures to display cult-like features (Tourish 2011, Armernic at al. 2007), and the emphasis on the "value of suffering" of the 'martyr' result in a "harsh leadership style" (Alvesson 2010: 64). Most importantly, founding the moral authority of the leader on the askēsis of the supposed 'saint' reframes ethics as a form of elitism based on the questionable assumption of managers as "superior moral educators" (Alvesson 2010: 74). The latter point thus connects the phenomenon to the discursive legitimation of management as a form of moral education, which, it will be argued below, can be seen as a feature of what Boltanski and Chiapello (2005) call the "new spirit of capitalism".

Armernic at al. (2007) take a similar critical line to Alvesson regarding the 'saint' metaphor. Once again, the self-attribution of "saintly demeanour" is related to a supposed 'moral exemplarity' such as is depicted in hagiographical texts (Armernic at al. 2007: 1853). The principal element of this demeanour, Jack Welch's supposed "virtues of compassion", however, had the effect of creating an organizational climate in which questioning the vision was unacceptable and an "authoritarian environment" brought about (Armeric at al. 2007: 1863). The exercise of moral authority by leaders under the aegis of apparent 'sainthood', therefore, is often paradoxically a stricter form of authoritarianism than would have been the case through an overtly authoritarian leadership style.

For Grint (2010: 92) "all leadership is sacred" in that it necessarily involves the symbolic or physical separation of leaders and followers. "Sacrifice" by the leader, an allusion to askēsis in the Weberian notion of "calling", is also related by Grint to the narrative form of the hagiography, whose principal

function is to convert "holy men" into legends (Brown 1971, 1983). The moral ambivalence of the basis of the separation of leaders from followers in the 'sacred', however, Grint argues, is often related to psychopathic tendencies: while it might be commonly thought that a 'good' leader cannot be a psychopath, in the sense that their followers might not have followed Hitler, Stalin or Mao *because* they were psychopaths, nevertheless it could have been the case that their followers "assumed their leaders were ethical" (Grint 2010: 90). A fundamental paradox in religious or 'sacred' metaphors applied to leadership might be that some leaders are 'set apart' from others *because* of psychopathic tendencies, in that these tendencies are seen as part of a 'higher' morality attained by a process of askēsis. An examination of ancient hagiographies shows that some saints were venerated *despite* or even perhaps *because* of such tendencies, as these traits were seen as indicating sanctity.

The 'priest' metaphor, put forward by Hatch et al. (2004) has been extensively criticized by Ruth (2014). By pursuing the "heuristics" (Cornelisson et al. 2005) of the metaphor, Ruth finds that it "breaks up on the rock of organizational design and the lack of a larger political framework of analysis" (176). One important element of Ruth's critique is that the "aura of holiness and ritual" which surrounds leader/'priests' is related to their appointment and succession, and the attribution of "fabulous powers" to them (particularly those who are entrepreneurs) "in spite of all the evidence" (Ruth 2014: 181). This element, particularly related to the death of leaders and their 'immortality', points to the role of hagiography in creating this 'life after death'.

The belief in a leader as 'saviour' or even 'messiah' seems to relate to the "erroneous belief that the quality of the CEO is the primary determinant of firm performance" (Khurana 2002: xiii). The most penetrative critical examination of the 'saviour' metaphor is that of Sørensen (2008), which, while specifically looking at the entrepreneur, is relevant to the analysis of similar metaphors in leadership. Sørensen's statement that our knowledge of business 'saviours' is primarily "narratological" (2008:86) points to the importance of hagiography, in particular popular CEO (auto-)biographies, in disseminating the metaphor. The most important aspect of Sørensen's critique, however, is that when analysing the etymology of the 'saviour' we are not just talking about how a leader 'saves' a particular company, but an idea which finds its legitimacy in the discourse of 'creativity', in which intuition is privileged over rational knowledge. This utopia of "creativity", "the heavenly state where the contradictions of capitalism have been resolved" (Sørensen 2008: 89) needs leaders who are 'saviours' as they discover "opportunities where ordinary people saw none" (Sørensen 2008: 91), perform "miracles" (Spoelstra 2010), and internalize the ascetic principle "that the important thing is not success or failure, but the material struggle fought" (Sørensen 2008: 91).

This important connection between a religious metaphor in leadership and a wider discursive legitimation in a 'spirit' of capitalism is also present in Western's (2013) examination of the 'messiah' metaphor, which he argues created as a way of remedying the deficiencies of the previously dominant characters/discourses of leadership, the "controller" (scientific management) and the "therapist" (human relations). For the 'messiah' character, the principal need was to create "strong collectivist cultures" (Western 2013: 105) which countered the perceived fragmentation and resultant social anxiety of postmodernity (Western 2013: 126). Western's 'messiah' also has strong links to ancient models of askēsis, in particular the belief that a leader must show "an almost magical ability to transcend adversity, with all its attendant stresses and to emerge stronger than before" (Western 2013: 110), a key feature of classic hagiographic narratives such as Athanasius's *Life of Anthony*, as I will show below.

An examination of the literature on 'saint' and related metaphors in leadership literature has shown the common feature that the moral authority of the leader is seen as residing *in the person*, as an

exemplar, rather than through the direct exercise of authority. The nature of this moral authority, however, as Alvesson, Armernic et al., Western, and others have shown, is highly ambivalent. This contradiction demonstrates the necessity of examining more closely basis of the moral authority of 'saints', in particular by examining classical models in religious and ascetic literature. Many of the traits attributed to leaders as 'saints' and related metaphors are associated with the possession of inner qualities such as self-denial, embracement of suffering, resilience, and vision, some of which are clearly 'pathological' in the sense that, in other people, as will be shown, they would be considered abnormal and undesirable, but in the 'saint' they are seen as desirable, indicating that their bearers are in some way seen as being 'beyond' or 'above' normal morality. The principal means of dissemination of 'sainthood' in leadership is narrative, in particular the hagiography, whose purpose is to turn human beings into 'legends', living or dead exemplars of ascetic ideals to be followed (Brown 1971, 1983). To explain the prevalence of such models in contemporary organizations we need to invoke the concept of a 'spirit of capitalism', the set of legitimizing discourses and ideologies which enable such 'characters' as the 'saint' to be seen as desirable.

The discursive legitimation of neo-ascetic models of leadership in the 'new spirit of capitalism'

A discursive approach to leadership focuses on how models of what constitutes leadership are legitimized by wider economic, social, and political forces (Fairhurst 2011), in particular the Foucauldian understanding of discourse as an order of discourse or 'discursive formation' (Fairhurst 2011: 496), which asks "what cultural forces … define what leadership 'is' and how it is to be performed in a particular social setting at a given historic moment" (Fairhurst 2011: 501). Several authors attribute the rise of leadership 'saints' and related religious metaphors to wider discursive legitimation, in particular the relationship between asceticism, religion and the secular, the leader/saint figure finding its legitimation in "reduced community and increased secularization" (Alvesson 2010: 51), a "crisis of the American spirit" (Spector 2014), or "social anxiety" during economically "turbulent times" (Western 2013: 126). Several of these authors thus make direct or indirect reference to Weber's idea of a 'spirit of capitalism' as a legitimizing discourse.

The 'spirit of capitalism' can be defined as "the set of ethical imperatives which, although their purpose is foreign to capitalistic logic, inspire entrepreneurs in an activity conducive to capital accumulation" (Boltanski and Chiapello 2005: 8-9), which for Weber lay in an 'inner-worldy askēsis', a "normative support for the merchants and entrepreneurs of nascent capitalism" (Boltanski and Chiapello 2005, 9). In the late 20th century, however, this Weberian model experienced critique, particularly in the form of a hedonism which "clashed head on" with ascetic values (Boltanski and Chiapello 2005, 28), and a challenge to the authority of managers/leaders, based solely upon the degree to which they were living embodiments of the values of obedience and self-sacrifice.

The 'new' spirit of capitalism addressed this critique in that the authoritarian "cadres" of the past were replaced by "leaders" who were supposedly distinguished by irrational elements such as "creative intuition" rather than "cold, calculating instrumental rationality" (Boltanski and Chiapello 2005: 9). This shift created a problem of "modalities of control" for leaders: a move from direct, authoritarian control to control exercised primarily through communication. Management texts accordingly increasingly took the form of "edifying books or manuals of moral instruction" which became "the main vehicles for the diffusion and popularization of normative models" (Boltanski and Chiapello 2005: 58). In other words, in the new spirit of capitalism 'neo-ascetic' models of leadership emerged, in which elements of the Weberian model were presented in a different way, reflected in the incorporation of religious language and metaphors in leadership communication, presented under the aegis of (workplace) 'spirituality'.

Casey (1995) describes the resultant "neo-Protestant ethic" as an attempt to "restore Protestant cultural forms that have … faltered under the culture of narcissism of advanced industrial society" (181). The "culture of narcissism" is countered by incorporating "American "Southern-style" revivalism … evangelism, charisma and conversion" into leadership style (Casey 1995: 194), resulting in "religiosity" (Casey 1995: 193), "quasi-religiosity" or "spirituality" (Lips-Wiersma et al. 2009) in the workplace. In the next section I will analyse the principal narrative means through which this discursive re-legitimation of neo-ascetic leadership models is achieved, the hagiography.

The hagiographic narrative genre and the rhetoric of 'exemplum'

The contemporary CEO (auto-) biography can be interpreted as a re-instantiation of a hagiographical archetype, which has throughout history been a principal means of disseminating ascetic leadership models. In autobiographical accounts of business leaders, as Guthey, Clark et al. (2009: 125) point out, from the 1980s onward "focus shifted from establishing universal and timeless principles of management to explication the personality and persona of the CEO". Historical examples of narrative models of askēsis can be seen in the Stoics and in early Christian monastic writing (Halsall and Brown 2013), for example in Cassian's *Monastic Institutes* (Cassian 1999) and Climacus's *Ladder of Divine Ascent* (Climacus 1982). Reading these texts the aspirant ascetic would measure him/herself against models of perfection, and consequently engage in a process of reflection on weaknesses. Life thus comes to be seen as a "perfection-driven... project" (Sloterdijk 2013: 252).

A hagiography can be defined as "a narrative linguistic device that recounts the lives of saints so that the hearer can experience their imperative power" (Wyschogrod 1990: 6), the principal purpose of which was to "make persons into classics", to create "vivid persons as objects of ... personal loyalty and imitation" (Brown 1983: 3). Early Christian hagiographies played a vital role as "didactic tools and propaganda" (Kleinberg 2008: 190) to the general population and within the Church itself (Kleinberg 2008: 186). Reflecting a population "hungry for immediate religious experiences and charismatic leadership" (Kleinberg 2008: 198), the cult of hagiography reached its zenith in the 13th century with Jacobus de Voraigne's *The Golden Legend* (Voraigne 1987), a collection of over 130 saints Lives which concentrated on "action and miracle", a major factor in the production of a "narrativized cult of saints" (Kleinberg 2008, 243).

The hagiography has three essential elements: the existence of a real person in history, a series of deeds performed by that person which have led him/her being said to possess 'saintly' features, and the crafting of this 'legend' into literary form, either by another person (e.g. Athanasius's *Life of Anthony*), or by the saint him/herself (e.g. Augustine's *Confessions*) (Delahaye 1907: 8). A hagiography can encompass the spectrum of narrative techniques, from a primarily factual account of the saint's life, to elements of myth, folk tale and fantasy (Wilson 1983: 15). Hagiographies make use of the rhetorical form of the *exemplum* (Gelley 1995), in which the moral to be communicated is enacted or *performed* in the act of rhetoric itself: "the moral ... establishes a form of authority, enjoining its audience to heed its lesson, and to govern their actions accordingly' (Scanlon 1994, 33). The claim to authority of saint is thus 'validated through transmission" (Gelley 1995: 4), meaning that the principles of virtue embodied in the saint's Vita often call into question the bounds of conventional morality:

> "Often saints do not just heighten ordinary morality. They implicitly question it by seeming to embody a strange, higher standard that does not quite fit with the moral system that governs ordinary propriety." (Hawley 1987: xvi).

Brown (1983) emphasizes the social and political significance of the "holy man" in antiquity as "the one man who can stand outside" (91), a leader who "drew his powers from outside the human race" (92). Hagiographies have had an after-life in history and culture well beyond the confines of medieval Christianity. Athanasius's *Life of Anthony*, for instance, "holds a position of extraordinary prominence in the histories of Western ethics and spirituality" (Harpham 1987, 3), particularly influential in visual art and in literature (Bem 1992: 1106). Similarly, Augustine's *Confessions* is seen as the prototypical autobiography, "the transformation of a life story into a lesson in grace" (Sloterdijk 2013: 306). Hagiographies, then, can be seen as narrative archetypes invoked, whether consciously or not, in the shaping of later cultural myths surrounding leaders (Boyer 1988). Certain archetypes have been particularly significant in history, and can be seen still to be present in neo-ascetic leadership discourse. The following section will outline four such archetypes.

Ascetic narrative archetypes

1. The combative or heroic ascetic narrative

Athanasius's *Life of Anthony* has a number of features which lend it a paradigmatic status as the "combative or heroic" ascetic narrative archetype (Valantasis 1995). Anthony's life is narrated as a series of episodes in which he combats the forces of evil, depicted in the form of temptations to resist the call to ascetic life and remain within the earthly life. The predominant form of this narrative archetype is an 'inner struggle' between 'old' and 'new' selves, resulting in the production of a "new subjectivity" (Valantasis 1995).The 'combative' ascetic narrates life as a series of self-imposed 'tests' to be overcome, often including extreme acts of self-denial.

The combative or heroic narrative is the archetype closest to the form of asceticism attacked by Nietzsche in *The Genealogy of Morality* as symptomatic of a life-denying morality (Nietzsche 2007). As Kroll and Bachrach put it, "heroic ascetics were those holy men and women who were well known among their medieval contemporaries … for the lengths to which they would go in their self-injurious behaviours" (2005: 21). In the modern era, perhaps inspired by Nietzsche's critique, many might attribute such behaviour to psychopathologies in the sense that "persons who privately injure themselves, when it is made public, are generally considered mentally ill, even if they insist that religious reasons inspired such injuries" (Kroll and Bachrach 2005: 25).

In the (post-)modern era there is seemingly a renewed admiration for such heroic forms of askēsis as can be seen in the popularity in the lifestyle industries of "pseudo-ascetic maxims which preach renunciation and abstinence" (Macho 1994: 583, my translation), some cultural theorists speaking of the renaissance of a "de-spiritualized asceticism" independent of the religious context in which it originally occurred (Sloterdijk 2013: 38). In other words, the heroic ascetic performance has seemingly become re-legitimized, rendering "self-injurious behaviours meaningful and understandable" (Kroll and Bachrach 2005: 25).

2. The narrative of metanoia

St. Augustine's conversion to Christianity, as recounted in the *Confessions*, takes the form of a sudden mystical experience, a classic account of askēsis as *metanoia*, "a drastic change of mind, a radical renewal; … a sort of rebirth of the subject by himself" (Foucault 2005: 216). Examples of such 'metanoetic' moments abound in Christian hagiography, including those of St. Paul, St. Francis of Assisi, and St. Ignatius Loyola (Sloterdijk 2013: 302-11). The life of someone narrated from the perspective of this sudden change of mind or insight, which changes life fundamentally, is narrated in retrospect as leading up to this moment.

As in the heroic or combative narrative, inner struggle in the self leads up to the metanoietic experience, often in the form of "endo-rhetoric" (Sloterdijk 2013: 234), an interior dialogue between voices which urge which the person to go forwards towards the new life, and those which encourage him to slip backwards into an old one (see, for example Augustine, *Confessions* Book VIII, 19-30). The askēsis of metanoia is associated with the discovery of the faculty of will: "the will, divided against itself, finally reaches the moment when it becomes "entire"" (Arendt 1978: 64). The 'I' which recounts the story does so from the perspective of progress from a fragmented life to a unified one, in which "the entire system of mental drives is subordinated to a unified perspective of purpose" (Sloterdijk 2013: 306). Once attained, this perspective gives the subject a certainty of truth.

3. The 'holy fool'

The 'holy fool' as a cultural figure and narrative archetype in hagiography existed predominantly but not exclusively in Byzantine and Russian Orthodox Christianity (Thompson 1987), and can be defined as "a person who feigns insanity, pretends to be silly, or who provokes shock or outrage by deliberate unruliness" (Ivanov 2006: 1). The theological origins of the concept are found in St. Paul, who in the First Letter to the Corinthians writes: '"If any man among you seemeth to be wise in this world, let him become a fool, that he may be wise. For the wisdom of the world is foolishness with God". (St. Paul, 1 Cor. 1:20, 22–3, 27; 3:18–19)(Ivanov 2006: 19). 'Holy fools' are "fools for Christ's sake", and thus willingly embrace the ridicule and rejection they may face. By the nature of their behaviour and by their lack of respect for the conventional labels of what is regarded as 'wisdom' and 'foolishness' in a culture, 'holy fools' call these norms into question.

The behaviour of many of the Russian holy fools was 'anti-ascetic' in the narrow sense; they often indulged in drunkenness or sexual debauchery, with the purpose of throwing into question what was regarded as acceptable or unacceptable behaviour. There was undoubtedly a strong element of theatricality or the carnivalesque in the fools' behaviour (Bakhtin 1984). In Russian culture they seemingly corresponded to a need, in that society found them a "worthwhile behavioural model" (Thompson 1987: 16). The archetypal 'fool' in Russian literature is Prince Mishkin in Dostoevsky's *The Idiot* (Murav 1992). In looking for contemporary equivalents of this narrative archetype in leaders the question we need to ask is how "society appoints … the madman who meets its particular unacknowledged needs" (2006: 400). The rise of 'foolish', unruly or anti-authoritarian behaviour among business leaders, present in at least 2 of the cases to be examined, may indicate an increasing tendency for business leaders to embrace 'counterculture' in order to appear 'cool' (Frank 1998).

4. The Fasting Artist

Fasting as a religious practice and sign of saintliness has a history which stems from Hellenistic thought through Rabbinic Judaism (Diamond 2004), and came to be seen as an 'authenticating sign of holiness' (Finn Op 2009: 64). Fasting is seen as an outward sign, a means of *authenticating* sanctity. In the works of the early church fathers Tertullian and Origen, it is seen as a means of 'distinguishing the heroic apostles from the villains' (Finn Op 2009: 64), and in monastic texts it is associated with "a new note of suspicion of matter as inducing spiritual weakness and a loss of self-control" (Johnson 2000: 470).

In order to understand the transformations which ascetic performances such as fasting have undergone we can approach Kafka's 1922 story 'Ein Hungerkünstler' (translated as 'A Fasting Artist'). Here fasting has become an 'exhibition' or spectacle, "professional fasting" (Kafka 1952: 187), with a cage for the 'fasting artist' and seats arranged in front of it for an enthusiastic audience. There is even a

fully developed business structure surrounding fasts, the fasting artist treated *as* a performer with his own manager. What was previously merely an adjunct to religious practices has now become the thing in itself.

For the fasting artist himself, however, the fast may not be primarily performance, but *inner necessity*: for him it is the "easiest thing in the world" because of his deep "inner dissatisfaction" with himself (Kafka 1952: 190). What is thus normal for the fasting-artist is seen as pathological by the audience, and is at the same time attractive and abhorrent. In the second half of Kafka's story "professional fasting" suffers a decline in public interest, the "amusement seekers ... went streaming past him to other more favoured attractions" (Kafka 1952: 194). For the fasting artist, then, fasting could be an authentic sign of 'saintliness', but in the society in which he lives the public has lost interest in whether it truly is so. What has become all important is the *performance*, the spectacle: the ascetic act has become uncoupled from its spiritual or metaphysical basis. This disjunction will be important in interpreting the significance of the ascetic performances of leaders to be examined in the following CEO (auto-)biographies.

Interpretations of contemporary CEO (auto-) biographies in the light of the hagiographic archetypes

The popular CEO (auto-) biography has been recognized as of central importance in the "leadership industries", defined as those "clusters of promotional activities, representational practices, and cultural dynamics that revolve around different types of exemplary business personalities" (Guthey, Clark et al. 2009: 36). The CEO (auto-) biography plays a crucial role in this process of celebrification of business leaders and thereby to the promotion of the popularity of a particular type of leadership, heroic leadership, the promotion of "exemplars that can be readily emulated and followed" (Guthey, Clark et al. 2009: 122). Although the leaders thus promoted are undoubtedly celebrities, the crucial question here is the narrative strategies through which the (auto-)biographer communicates this 'exemplarity'. To this end, it will be argued, we need to view the (auto-) biographies as hagiographies whose function it is, by employing archetypes such as those outlined above, to "make persons into classics" (Brown 1983: 1).

The three (auto-)biographies selected for analysis fulfil a number of criteria relating to popularity, influence, cultural significance, style, and elements of asceticism in the life of the subjects depicted. Popularity was measured by sales figures of the (auto-)biography, mentions of the book in 'most influential books' sections of popular business magazines and websites, most of which are compiled by means of votes from business leaders, the subjects featuring in ranking orders such as "The world's most powerful people" (*Forbes* Magazine), and further indications of celebrity such as media appearances, biopics, and awards and honours by governments and other bodies. The three selected (auto-) biographies demonstrate contrasting approaches to the crafting of a hagiographic legend in that one is deceased, one retired (but still active in the media), and that one founds his fame on an apparently 'anti-ascetic' lifestyle.

Descriptions of the three works selected and their subjects follow.

Isaacson's *Steve Jobs*, originally published in 2011 shortly after the subject's death, sold 379,000 copies in the US in first week after its publication (CNN, November 3rd 2011) and 272,000 copies in the UK within 6 months of publication (*Guardian*, 1st November 2011), topped the bestseller charts in the US, and has been translated into many languages. At Jobs's death vigils were held at Apple stores, eulogies where given by the U.S. President and U.K. Prime Minster among other politicians. In

addition to the biography, there have been several documentaries, biopics, and special issues of business and popular magazines devoted to his life, including some satires.[1]

Wallace and Erikson's *Hard Drive. Bill Gates and the Making of the Microsoft* was originally published in 1993. Prior to stepping down as Microsoft CEO in 2008 to devote himself to philanthropic activities, Gates been voted CEO of the year in 1999 by CEO magazine, one of the world's top 100 powerful people by *Time* magazine in 2004, 2005, and 2006, and the fourth most powerful person in the world by Forbes magazine (*Forbes*, December 5th, 2012).

Richar Branson's autobiography *Losing my Virginity* was first published in 2007, and currently figures at No. 3, 546 on Amazon.com's sales ranking. He is probably the best known business celebrity in the UK, a celebrity status which is enhanced by numerous world record breaking attempts, television appearances and philanthropic activities. He featured in *Time* magazine's Top 100 'most influential people' in 2007. He was knighted in 2000.

It is recognized that all 3 of the subjects chosen are male, white, and Anglo-Saxon in origin. As Guthey, Clark et al. (2009) show, the business celebrity industry is becoming increasingly global, diverse, and now includes female celebrity leaders. In the field of ancient hagiographical research, there has also been increasing focus on female saints, and to what degree their hagiographies differ in the ascetic features highlighted in comparison to their male counterparts (Clark 1998). An interesting perspective for future leadership studies might be to examine female CEO (auto-)biographies to determine whether they draw on similar ascetic features to their male counterparts in their depictions of leadership style, or indeed whether they are hagiographies at all, and to what degree non-Western celebrity leaders draw on ascetic traditions in their own cultures in their (auto-)biographies.

Passages from the leader (auto-)biographies are selected on the basis of how the narrator depicts the subjects as exemplars of ascetic perfection, crafting together often contradictory elements. Of particular importance are instances of "idiosyncratic personal behaviours" of the subjects, which, as (Guthey, Clark et al. 2009: 23) point out, seem to be of central importance in their celebrification. In interpreting these episodes an attempt will be made to read them deconstructively against the intentions of the hagiographer, highlighting the moral ambivalence of their subjects in relation to their fellow employees, 'subordinates' and human beings.

1. The life of 'Saint' Steve Jobs

The interpretation of Jobs's life and death as that of a saint-like figure was noted in several obituaries, and evidence of his status as a cult-like leader could be seen in the reverence of Apple devotees in front of computer images of 'Steve Jobs RIP' at the time of his death and 'vigils' held in his memory at Apple stores. The principal element in fashioning this image was his 'outsider' status, which related in particular to the influence of his beliefs in Zen Buddhism and Indian religions, and which can be seen as part of the cultivation of an ascetic lifestyle.

Even in the early days, 1972, when he was a dropout from college, according to the biographer, "he had begun his lifelong experiments with compulsive diets, eating only fruit and vegetables, so he was lean and tight as a whippet" (Isaacson 2013: 31). This dieting and fasting was associated with an aura of willed "craziness": "He learned to stare at people without blinking, and he perfected long silences punctuated by staccato bursts of fast talking" (Isaacson 2013: 31). The image of Jobs at this stage of his life corresponds very much to the archetypes of the 'fasting artist' and that of the 'combative ascetic', for both of which rejection of food and neglect of the body was central. When he joined the company Atari, for instance, his belief in not washing led to a certain repulsion towards him on the

part of other employees: "Jobs clung to the belief that his fruit-heavy vegetarian diet would prevent not just mucus but also body odor, even if he didn't use deodorant or shower regularly. It was a flawed theory" (Isaacson 2013: 43).

Jobs's search for 'Enlightenment', resulting in a trip to India in 1974, seemingly brought about a metanoetic experience through which he 'discovered' the importance of intuition above intellect: "Intuition is a very powerful thing, more powerful than intellect, in my opinion. That's had a big impact on my work" (Jobs, cited in Isaacson 2013: 48). This state gave Jobs access to a truth, he believed, which was beyond rationality, which others around him did not have, and meant that his views were not open to question by others. Instances of Jobs's decisions based just on his 'intuition' abound in the biography. The idea for the name 'Apple', for instance, came to him in such a moment of intuition, as Jobs says, "I was on one of my fruitarian diets (…) I had just come back from the apple farm. It sounded fun, spirited, and not intimidating" (Jobs, cited in Isaacson 2013: 63). Job's quest for 'perfection' and the fashioning of an aura of invincibility based on ascetic discipline resulted in idiosyncratic behaviour towards his fellow workers and entrepreneurial colleagues, but which is excused, even among those who suffered because of it. In the case of his early business partner Steve Wozniak, for instance, a confrontation with whom resulted in Jobs bursting into tears (Isaacson 2013: 73) is excused as an essential feature of his character, without which he (Wozniak) "might still be handing out schematics of his boards … at the back of Homebrew meetings" (Isaacson 2013: 73).

Similarly, in a childish conflict with Mike Scott, who had been brought in as CEO of Apple 'to keep a check on Jobs' and his personality traits, about who should have the identity badges #1 and #2, Jobs's "stubbornness" is excused by Scott as "a passion for product, a passion for product perfection"(Isaacson 2013: 83). Similarly, Andy Hertzfeld, an early engineer of Apple, excuses Jobs's mistreatment of others: "He's anti-loyal. He has to abandon the people he is close to" (Isaacson 2013: 103).

In some cases, Jobs's behaviour is identified by those around him as attributable to a psychological defect. John Sculley, whom Jobs brought in from Pepsi as President of Apple, for instance, believed that his "mercurial personality and erratic treatment of people" was based on a "mild bipolarity" (Isaacson 2013: 157) with which the biographer seems to concur. An instance of this is related by Sculley: "we would go to the Mac building at eleven at night … they would bring him code to show. In some cases he wouldn't even look at it. He would just take it and throw it back at them … he would say, 'I know they can do better'" (Isaacson 2013: 157). The employee, in other words, had not undergone a perfect askēsis and should reflect on their imperfection. Even Jobs's being fired from his own company in 1985, followed by a string of failures, is interpreted as a kind of self-imposed test, as in the case of St. Anthony: "This was the true learning experience" (Isaacson 2013: 219). Failures, in the ascetic narrative of hagiography, are almost something welcome, signs of a test willingly undergone.

The greatest evidence of the 'combative' archetype of ascetic narrative came in the latter part of Jobs's life, with his terminal illness. In retrospect, Jobs attributed the origins of his cancer to the time in 1997 when he was in effect running two companies: "It was rough, the worst time in my life. I had a young family. ... I would go to work at 7a.m and I'd get back at 9 at night. And I couldn't speak, I literally couldn't, I was so exhausted" (Isaacson 2013: 333-4). His not being 'able to walk away' from two jobs could be interpreted as a pathological sign of 'workaholism', but, in the context of Jobs's perfectionist vita it is a virtue.

One of the most familiar signs of the deliberate hagiographic crafting of his 'legend' came in the highly dramatized product launches of iPhone or iPod, at which Jobs was latterly emaciated by his cancer. At one such launch, for the iMac, he rehearses the presentation countless times and launches tirades against employees: "Let's keep doing it until we get it right, okay? … No, … This isn't working at all … I'm getting tired of asking about this" (Jobs, cited in Isaacson 2013: 477). When his cancer was diagnosed in 2003, Jobs initially refused medical intervention: "I really didn't want them to open up my body, so I tried to see if a few other things would work" (Jobs, cited in Isaacson 2013: 454). The "few other things" included strict dietary regimes and acupuncture. This was, it seems, evidence of a belief that his askēsis could transcend bodily decay. During his cancer treatment, Jobs maintained his belief in fasting and strict dietary regimes: "Beginning in 2008 Jobs's eating disorders got worse. On some nights he would stare at the floor and ignore all the dishes set out on the long kitchen table. When others were halfway through their meal, he would abruptly get up and leave, saying nothing" (Isaacson 2013: 477).

In the run up to his death, it seems that Jobs was consciously crafting the ascetic narrative of his life, obvious in one of the final interviews with Isaacson before his death: "I hate it when people call themselves "entrepreneurs" … They're unwilling to do the work it takes to build a real company, which is the hardest work in business. … I don't think I run roughshod over people, but if something sucks, I tell people to their face. It's my job to be honest. I know what I'm talking about, and I usually turn out to be right. … I was hard on people sometimes, probably harder than I needed to be. … It was hard. But somebody's got to do it" (Jobs, cited in Isaacson 2013: 569-70). Others had not undergone the ascetic discipline and self-sacrifice (including perhaps working himself to death) which he had, and therefore did not understand the true nature of leadership. His mistreatment of others was thus necessary and, within the logic of the ascetic, entirely justified.

2. Bill Gates: the 'nerd' as ascetic

The principal form of askēsis present in the biography of Bill Gates is that aspect of his personality popularly described as a 'nerd' – his obsession with computers from an early age, and what this, and his consequent lack interaction with other human beings, testified about his claim to 'sanctity' and being 'set apart from' others. Throughout the biography what might be seen as a 'personality disorder' is narrated as necessary to the insight and drive necessary to be a successful business leader.

The biographer argues that Gates was 'set apart' from other people even from an early age and even before his interest in computers. In his childhood in Seattle, for instance, in an incident is recounted in which the young Gates attends Sunday school, and is able to memorize and recite the whole of the Sermon on the Mount: "No one, in all his years in the ministry, had been able to make it through the entire passage without stumbling over at least a few words or lines. But Gates had recited the passage nonstop from the beginning, never missing a line" (Wallace and Erikson 1993: 6-8). This feat of memory is depicted as a moment of epiphany: "That evening, as Gates looked out on the city, the suburbs, the mountains, and the waters of the Sound, he was oblivious to his destiny slowly revolving around him" (Wallace and Erikson 1993: 8).

The "exciting new world of computers", into which Gates throws himself at his school and later at Harvard University, begins to obsess him to such an extent that his parents begin to have concerns about this 'dehumanizing, addictive behavior' (Wallace and Erikson 1993: 34) in their son, with the result that they order him to give up computers for a period of 9 months. In retrospect Gates says ironically '"I tried to be normal ... the best I could" (Gates, cited in Wallace and Erikson 1993: 34).

The ambivalence of others towards this 'abnormality' is shown in the comments of several ex-classmates:

> '"He was socially inept and uncomfortable around others. The guy was totally obsessed with his interest in computers. ... Initially I was in awe of Gates and the others in that room. I even idolized them to some extent."

> ""Everyone knew who Bill Gates was. I don't think there was anyone in the school who didn't. There were nerd types that no one ever noticed, and there were nerd types that everyone knew. Bill fit that latter category. He looked like a little kid, for one thing. ... He was also incredibly obnoxious. He was also considered the brightest kid in school." (Wallace and Erikson 1993: 36)

We can see clearly evidence of the archetype of the 'holy fool' here: Gates's outward 'abnormal' behaviour, misunderstood and indeed reviled by some of those around him at the time, has proved in retrospect to be the foundation of that which sets him apart from others. The veil of the 'holy fool's' 'madness,' is not seen through by everyone, and those who did not see through it misunderstood him.

Gates's 'pathological' obsession with computers continued at Harvard University, and became associated with behaviours such as sleep deprivation, which indicate the invocation of the archetype of heroic or combative askēsis: "He was living on the edge. It was not unusual for him to go as long as three days without sleep. How he coped with lack of sleep I never figured out," said Znaimer (a former fellow student). Sleep deprivation, as seen in medieval monastic Rules, was a common feature of monastic ascetic life: "sleep deprivation … was part of a larger ascetic pattern that often included varying degrees of self-injurious behaviors and fasting" (Kroll and Bacharach 2005: 80).

Gates' 'pathological' behaviour culminates in his wish to drop out of university to run a business, an intention which his bourgeois parents try to fight by getting a family friend, to convince him otherwise. Gates's enthusiasm and 'vision' gained through his sleep deprivation and other elements of askēsis, however, 'convert' the friend to his cause: "The personal computer revolution was just beginning ... . Eventually, everyone would own a computer. Imagine the money-making possibilities. ... a zillion machines all running on his software" (Wallace and Erikson 1993: 88).

Gates's ascetic belief in his mission and rightness is then translated into a 'religious' attitude prevalent in the corporate culture of Microsoft:

> "The people employed by MITS and Microsoft were youthful computer fanatics, religious zealots who worshipped The Machine. "It was almost a missionary kind of work in the sense that we were delivering something to someone they never thought they could have," recalled Eddie Curry. "There was a kinship that you wouldn't normally see in commercial enterprise between not only the people in the company but between the people in the company and the customer base. People would work from early in the morning until the end of the day. ... Typically, there were people at MITS 24 hours a day, seven days a week." (Wallace and Erikson 1993: 94)

On one occasion this monastic ascetic zeal is evident is when some visitors being shown round the company discover Gates asleep rolled up in a sleeping bag on the floor. Such anecdotes build the image of the saintly figure whose unkempt appearance and 'childlike' innocence (characteristic of the 'holy fool') are depicted in the following passage:

"Now twenty years old, (Gates) looked more like fourteen. His hair was uncombed and hung helter-skelter over his eyebrows and ears, and his thick, oversized glasses accentuated his childlike appearance. His high-pitched voice underscored his youthfulness. But Gates did have a certain charisma. His words crackled with the authority of someone much older and wiser" ... recalled Winkless, the Personal Computing magazine editor." (Wallace and Erikson 1993: 105)

This aspect of behaviour which would be regarded as intolerable in others, but 'excusable' in the saint, is recounted by business colleagues at Microsoft:

"For all his native acumen, Gates was also rough-edged and inexperienced in the art of the deal. Gates' style was to browbeat customers until they wilted and acquiesced. But he often was so intense in negotiating sessions that he would push too hard and actually jeopardize the deal." (Wallace and Erikson 1993: 150)

The resultant culture of discipline, long hours and aggression towards others could be unpleasant for those who did not adhere to it. In one instance, a female employee complained to the Ministry of Labour about unpaid hours which she had worked: the result was a tirade from Gates: "Gates would often lose his temper, which was upsetting to staff workers unfamiliar with his confrontational style. (…) "Bill came storming into my office, absolutely purple he was screaming so much," (recalled one of the women involved in the complaint). "He said we had ruined the reputation of his company" (Wallace and Erikson 1993: 161). We can, then, see in the hagiography of Gates the presence of the 'combative' or 'heroic' archetype, with its associated behaviour, such as sleep deprivation, and that of the 'holy fool', whose 'abnormal' behaviour hides a sanctity which others are not able to see.

3. Richard Branson as 'holy fool'

At first sight, Richard Branson's life, as depicted in his autobiography, does not fit a classic ascetic archetype, as his life is the opposite of self-denial or abstinence from pleasure. His whole persona is a life devoted to a sense of fun, to the breaking of rules, and to unconventional behaviour. If we examine the autobiography more closely, however, we sense the presence of the 'holy fool' archetype, in that Branson's outward 'foolishness', is always 'foolishness for a purpose'.

His cultivated 'outsider' status, misunderstood and rejected by those around him, became apparent at an early age, as his unrecognized dyslexia "meant to the rest of the class and the teachers that you were either stupid or lazy. And at prep school you were beaten for both. I was soon being beaten once or twice a week for doing poor classwork or confusing the date of the Battle of Hastings" (Branson 2009: 28). The resultant rejection or even ridicule by those around him, however, is turned by him into a source of inward strength: "Perhaps my early problems with dyslexia made me more intuitive: ... rather than dwelling on detailed facts and figures I find that my imagination grasps and expands on what I read" (Branson 2009: 28). This gift of 'intuition' which his disability gives him will become important in his business career as it is something which others do not possess.

Being confronted with obstacles, a key feature of the development of a "rebellious streak" in him (Branson 2009: 36) was furthered by being at a strict boarding school, in which there were "as many rules and regulations as the army – many of them, … completely anachronistic and pointless" (Branson 2009: 36), is narrated as a 'test to be overcome' in the manner of the combative archetype. The headmaster's parting words to the rebellious student, "Congratulations, Branson. I predict that you will either go to prison or become a millionaire" (Branson 2009: 45) which might be seen as a condemnation, are in fact a recognition of his misunderstood 'holy fool' status, even at an early age.

Branson's lack of respect for rules and procedures in his early business career get him into trouble with the law, in one case with Customs and Excise:

> "'Are you Richard Branson?' they said. 'We're Customs and Excise and we've got a warrant to inspect your stock.'
>
> These men were rather different from the two dowdy little accountants I had been expecting. They were bulky, tough men, and very threatening. Some of my cocksureness evaporated as I showed them into the warehouse.
>
> 'You're meant to have gone to Belgium yesterday,' one of them said. 'You can't get back this quickly.'
>
> I tried to laugh this off as I watched them begin to check all the records with their ultraviolet lamp. They grew increasingly worried when they couldn't find any marked records. I enjoyed their confusion
>
> …I couldn't believe it. I had always thought that only criminals were arrested: it hadn't occurred to me that I had become one. I had been stealing money from Customs and Excise. ... I was guilty." (Branson 2009: 89)

His resultant experience of arrest and prison is interpreted in the self-narrative of askēsis as an 'opportunity for training' as in the combative archetype: "That night was one of the best things that has ever happened to me" (Branson 2009: 90). This fulfilment of the headmaster's prophecy is interpreted in the autobiography as not just compatible with his leadership but a necessary part of it.

Branson's faculty of 'intuition', founded on the fact that he conducts his life as a series of self-imposed tests, gives him access to a truth which others around him do not possess. When thinking of entering the airline business to set up Virgin Airlines, for instance, his decision is not based upon rational calculation of business, but 'insight':

> "In the same way that I tend to make up my mind about people within thirty seconds of meeting them, I also make up my mind about whether a business proposal excites me within about thirty seconds of looking at it. I rely far more on gut instinct than researching huge amounts of statistics. ... The idea of operating a Virgin airline grabbed my imagination, but I had to work out in my own mind what the potential risks were." (Branson 2009: 193)

This 'insight' is something which opens him to ridicule and incomprehension by fellow business associates who see it as indicating 'madness'. In relation to the Virgin Airlines decision Branson is convinced that "I had done all the market research I felt I needed to do and had made up my mind" (Branson 2009: 193). One colleague says "You're a megalomaniac, Richard," … "We've been friends since we were teenagers, but if you do this I'm not sure that we can carry on working together" (Branson 2009: 193). Branson's retort to these expressions of incomprehension is "it'll be fun", to which the reaction of the colleagues was to "wince" (Branson 2009: 194) in further incomprehension, further confirming his 'madness' in the eyes of others.

A further instance of the unconventional behaviour of Branson as 'holy fool' was the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait in 1990, and his resultant mission to Baghdad to rescue Westerners stranded there. This 'foolish' behaviour is once again greeted with incomprehension by those around him: his scheme to rescue the hostages involved negotiating directly with Saddam Hussein, and then taking a Virgin plane to Baghdad to pick the hostages up, ignoring Foreign Office civil servants and ministers, with

the risk that he too and the plane crew could be held as hostages. This is greeted by ridicule by others in the airline industry: "There is one upside,' … 'They'll hold Richard there too and spare us any more of his harebrained schemes!" Everyone laughed' (Branson 2009: 285). Once again, however, the 'fool' is proved right, as the mission succeeds and the hostages are rescued. A 'miracle' has been performed, a key element of his claim to sanctity.

At the end of the autobiography such risks and his apparent willingness to be seen as a 'fool' by others to pursue causes he believes in is discussed by Branson in confessional mode:

> "I am often asked why I go in for record-breaking challenges with either powerboats or hot-air balloons. People point out that, with success, money, and a happy family, I should stop putting myself and them at risk and enjoy what I am so lucky to have. This is an obvious truth, and part of me wholeheartedly agrees with it. … But another part of me is driven to try new adventures, and I still find that I want to push myself to my limits." (Branson 2009: 213)

The concept of life here espoused is clearly that of a series of self-imposed tests of the 'combative' ascetic and a willingness to embrace being regarded as a 'fool' as a result, in pursuance of an 'exemplary' attitude of wanting to 'push oneself to one's limits', as much applied to life as to business.

Differences and analogies between the medieval hagiography and the CEO (auto-)biography as a means of dissemination of ascetic leadership models

At first glance, the conditions of production and reception, and thus the hermeneutics of the medieval hagiography and the contemporary CEO (auto-)biography as a means of dissemination of ascetic leadership models among followers are fundamentally different. In the former a strong, centrally-focused system of religious belief existed, within which saints and their hagiographers had a central role in promoting belief. In postmodern capitalism, it appears, no such belief exists. In fact, as argued above, the Weberian model of asceticism, central to a previous spirit of capitalism in Weber's view, has been challenged in the 'new' spirit. Furthermore, readers of the contemporary CEO (auto-)biography are, consequently, much more likely to greet the claims of contemporary leaders to 'sanctity' with scepticism, cynicism and disbelief, particularly give the evidence of the 'dark side' of their leadership styles, as evident in the readings above, and the connection between these leadership styles and the causes of financial and other crises (Tourish 2013).

In addition, it seems the model of production and reception have also changed, moving from that of the solitary saint or his/her hagiographer crafting a 'legend', writing for an audience which might have constituted a small proportion of the population, or disseminated in oral form through readings in church or monastery (Kleinberg 2008), to a situation where the CEO (auto-)biography is just a small part of the wider 'business celebrity industry'(Guthey, Clark et al. 2009). While there are obvious differences in the power of the media involved, scholars of medieval hagiography have pointed to the popularity and power of the genre, particularly in the form of popular anthologies such as Voraigne's *The Golden Legend* (Voraigne 1942), which played a key role in "legitimizing and enhancing power and wealth" and "sponsoring new cults" of saints (Howard-Johnston and Hayward 1999: 7), to which extent it might be legitimate to speak of an 'industry'. The term 'cult' used to describe the medieval reception of hagiographies, has also been used to describe the monolithic organizational cultures created by transformational leadership 'legends' in the contemporary setting (Tourish 2011).

A range of reception positions to the products of the contemporary business celebrity industry have been identified, ranging from those who attack the notion as invalid, betokening just media manipulation and self-aggrandizement (Guthey, Clark at al. 2009: 148), to "traditionalists" who, while attacking those leaders who seem to rely on self-promotion in this way, are "true believers" in the sense that they maintain that these are 'real' leaders who are still to be put "on a pedestal" beyond the media hype (Guthey, Clark et al. 2009: 150). While the celebrity aspects of the reception of CEO (auto-)biographies are important, this is, however, not the principal element of their reception which is argued for in this paper; rather, the emphasis here is on the ascetic models of leadership propagated, the reasons for their popularity, and whether there are analogies, despite these differences, between the reception conditions of the medieval hagiography and its contemporary equivalents.

The first level of analogy, as argued above, is their structure, form, and function. The principal function of the 'legend' or hagiography is the "call on the readers or listeners to imitate the saint" (Hegele and Kieser 2001: 299), mainly through the rhetoric of the 'exemplum', a form of communication of virtue or moral principles which does not rest on their discursive communication. 'Imitation' in the contemporary setting is a more complex process than in the medieval world, and takes place on a number of levels. The first, which Hegele and Kieser (2001) call the "virtue of success" (which in the contemporary world means primarily wealth), is arguably analogous to the 'miracle' of the medieval saint (Spoelstra 2010; Sørensen 2008), in that there is a 'secret' to be communicated by the hagiographer, seen as residing in the 'character' of the saint as narrated. In the contemporary setting, in addition to the hagiography itself, these 'miracles' of success, as Hegele and Kieser (2001) show in the case of Jack Welch, are communicated in the related genre of books setting out 'leadership secrets of ...' (301), seminars, articles and academic recognition, which are consumed by the hungry audience of "business magazines, analysts, professors of business schools, (and) consultants" (Hegele and Kaiser 2001: 304). The second level of dissemination is that of institutions, in particular the business school, to which I will return below.

The explanatory connection between the individual 'saint'/leader and 'miracles' in the CEO (auto-) biography, i.e. between leadership style and success is, as in the medieval hagiography, largely "incomplete and vague" and "ambiguous" (Hegele and Kieser 2001: 301, 305), in that it is usually not founded on rational argument or proof, but on establishing a link between 'character' and 'miracle'. This link contributes to the belief in the legitimacy of "executives who operated virtually untethered by external constraints" (Spector 2014: 367), in other words leaders who base their 'success' entirely on an inner process of askēsis. In fact, as Hegele and Kieser (2001) argue, the more ambiguous the recipes for 'successful' leadership are, "the more the readers can use them as justification for their own actions", such as the "application of Darwinian principles to the management of employees" (304). The reason for this is, as I have argued, is that if such 'Darwinian principles' were formulated as discursive moral precepts they would undoubtedly be rejected in organizations and in a society which generally sees them as immoral. Within the rhetoric of 'exemplum', and as narrated as essentially relating to the character of a 'saint' founded on askēsis, however, they appear to 'speak for themselves'. Even when in the hagiography flaws in the character of the CEO/'saint' are apparent, as in the cases above, they are always narrated as excused (by others) and even necessary to success. The hagiographic form, therefore, contributes to a legitimation of these practices and to a deflection of critique, which, as I have argued following Boltanski and Chiapello (2005), is one of the main ways in which a spirit of capitalism maintains legitimacy despite its basis having been undermined in other respects.

This brings us to the question of critique and the possibility of reading the hagiography against the intentions of the hagiographer, which appears to be an important difference between the medieval

model and the contemporary situation. Both Hegele and Kieser (2001) and Wray-Bliss (2012) have dealt with this issue in the context of CEO 'sanctification'. Even in the medieval context, it seems, there were attempts to counter the trend towards sanctification by the circulation of 'counter-legends' during the Reformation, whose purpose was to discredit saints by means of ridicule and pouring doubt on the veracity of the 'miracles' performed. In the contemporary setting there have, of course, been similar critiques, such as in the case of Jack Welch discussed by Hegele and Kieser (2001), the 'counter-legend' published by O'Boyle (1998), which pointed out the "environmental scandals, frauds, incidents of blackmail" under his leadership, not to speak of the bullying leadership style (303). The difficulty which 'counter-legends' face in the presence of sanctification, however, is that in an overwhelming climate of belief, they might be dismissed as 'heresy', and, as Hegele and Kieser (2001) point out, in the light of this seeming will to believe, "it is futile to ask who the "real" Jack Welch is" (305). This is not to say that critique is pointless, but that, to some extent "legends are not falsifiable ... They live as long as the believers want them to live" (Hegele and Kieser 2001: 308).

Wray-Bliss (2012) also examines critique of CEO sanctification in the form of its mirror image, demonization. Personification in the figure of the devil is, according to Wray-Bliss, just as much a feature of monotheistic religion as sanctification, in particular the form of Christianity which he argues has inspired U.S. capitalism. The belief that "corporate malfeasance" is "embodied in singular 'evil' individuals" is a "more easily digestible and communicable story" than, for instance, a critique of the leadership discourse which has legitimized such individuals, or the model of capitalism on which this is based (Wray-Bliss 2012: 443). While demonizing critique is undoubtedly legitimate, it could be seen as misplaced, as "a demonizing trope ultimately re-assures" (Wray-Bliss 2012: 443). Milton's Satan, Wray-Bliss reminds us, was a fallen angel, and the demonization of leaders still leaves untarnished the image of the "self-begot" CEO leader (Wray-Bliss 2012: 443), and the wider system of capitalism which created them.

This leads us on to the principal feature of the contemporary situation which makes an analogy between the CEO (auto-)biography and the medieval hagiography appropriate, the existence of a strong legitimizing leadership discourse inspired by 'spirituality', that of transformational leadership. As Spector (2014) points out, transformational leadership entered management discourse in the 1980s in the US, as a reaction to a perceived 'malaise' in the economy, and the supposed failure of 'managers' to deal with it, thus setting up a dichotomy between 'leaders' and 'managers'. From the outset, Spector argues, personification of all the supposed virtues of a leader in one figure, in particular Chrysler CEO Lee Iaccoca, was not just incidental, but an essential feature of the discourse. Although Spector uses the term 'hero' rather than 'saint' to describe this personification, it is not difficult to see elements of the ascetic saint in the process as described.

First, the belief that transformational leaders such as Iacocca displayed "moral superiority" (Spector 2014: 373), a belief which was far from the truth, as Spector's exposé of his bullying leadership style shows, was based on the idea of "shared sacrifice" (371), which clearly seems to be an ascetic value. This relationship between asceticism and transformational leadership can be seen even more clearly if we examine some scholarship which advocates an affirmative link between the two concepts. Jones (1995), for instance, sees the "ethical leader" as an "ascetic construct" and mentions affirmatively ascetic behaviour such as getting up early in the morning and fasting (869). The ascetic, Jones (1995) maintains, may be "a very difficult person to work for", but will be motivated by "an inner call to moral excellence" (869).

Sosik and Cameron (2010) also make a clear link between 'character' of the leader, which they argue is an ascetic construct, and 'authentic' transformational leadership. An "ascetic self-construal" is

defined as "a character ethic that is shaped and controlled by the power of an inner call to moral excellent reflected in character strengths" (Sosik and Cameron 2010: 260). Central to such a 'character ethic' and thus 'authentic' transformational leadership, in the minds of its advocates, are the leader's "life experiences" in particular the fact that "transformational leaders tend to overcome personal challenges in life" (Sosik and Cameron 2010: 261). This appears to be a confirmation that the notion of a life of a leader narrated as a series of 'tests' to be overcome, particularly characteristic of the 'combative' or 'heroic' ascetic archetype as argued above, is a key feature of the ascetic self-construal of 'transformational leaders'.

Finally, in examining the analogies between the reception of CEO (auto-)biography and the medieval hagiography, institutions, in particular business schools, are crucial in legitimizing the perpetuation of such leadership models. Several authors have pointed to this important role. Spector (2014) points to "the pedagogy offered in U.S. and U.K. MBA programmes" as essential to the hegemony of the transformational model, in particular its over-attribution and romanticization of leadership (366). Similarly, Tourish et al. (2010) in an empirical examination of pedagogy and promotional materials of leading U.S. and U.K. business schools, point to the prominence of celebrity CEOs in this material, in particular their regular invitation of to make presentations to students and their presence in case study material. That the reading of CEO (auto-) biographies plays a key role in this institutional process of dissemination is almost certainly the case. What is clear is that the business school creates a hagiographical aura surrounding 'transformational' leaders based on "hubris, self-eulogy and narcissism" (Tourish et al. 2010: 51), which contributes to the belief in their status as 'legends' to be imitated.

Concluding remarks: charisma and neo-ascetic leadership models

I have argued that the CEO (auto-)biography, understood as a re-instantiation of the archetypal form of the hagiography, has played a key role in re-legitimation of neo-ascetic leadership models in the present spirit of capitalism, founded on a leadership discourse, transformational leadership, and a series of analogies between the production and reception conditions of such texts and that of the hagiography in medieval times. In concluding it is necessary to return to Weber, in particular the relationship between asceticism and charisma in his work.

Weber's definition of charismatic authority is "a certain quality of an individual personality by virtue of which he is set apart from ordinary men and treated as endowed with supernatural, superhuman, or at least exceptional powers or qualities" (Weber 1947: 358). He clearly thought that this pure form of charisma was "foreign to economic considerations" (Weber 1947: 362) i.e. business, and the everyday. This charismatic authority, however, could become separated from the individual 'routinized' into a 'charisma of office' (Weber 1947: 366). Such a 'charisma of office' could, for instance, have been associated with the role of the 'manager' in a previous spirit of capitalism (Boltanski and Chiapello 2005). A similar process is to be observed in Weber's notion of ascetic authority, as set out in *The Protestant Ethic and The Spirit of Capitalism.* Asceticism in its "other-worldly" form, Weber says, was "always hostile to authority" (Weber 1992: 224); this becomes transformed into the "worldly asceticism" of the capitalist, and "ascetic conduct" becomes associated with the "rational planning" of one's life, which "could be required of everyone" (Weber 1992: 100).

It becomes clear with the emergence of the critique of 'management' which accompanied the rise of the discourse of transformational leadership in the 1980s (Spector 2014; Tourish 2013) that the 'office' of manager began to lose its charismatic authority; at the same time the legitimacy of 'inner-worldly' rational asceticism of the capitalist began to be challenged, particularly by hedonism and

consumerism (Boltanski and Chiapello 2005). This seemed to necessitate the re-emergence of a new form of charismatic authority of the 'transformational' leader who stood outside the norm, embraced irrationality, and whose charismatic authority could be grounded, as I have argued, in the narrative form of the hagiography and other forms of communication. This was accompanied by a re-legitimation of ascetic behaviour, but, as I have shown, with a strongly 'anti-authoritarian' emphasis (as is clear in the behaviour of all three leaders examined in this article), which draws in Weber's "other-worldly" asceticism.

The appropriation of the notion of askēsis in the furtherance of authoritarian leadership styles and compliant cultures, as argued here, does not, however, necessarily invalidate all leadership models based on the notion of askēsis. A future direction for leadership research might be the examination of notions of *truly* ethical askēsis which would "question the forms of ethical subjectivity being espoused under the neoliberal project" (Munro 2014: 4), and which would correspond to the turn towards "post-heroic" or "altruistic" leadership models based on humility (Morris et al. 2005, Guthey, Clark et al. 2009). This would involve a re-examination of leadership exemplarity in ancient sources, whether religious or philosophical, such as that carried out by Foucault in his later works. In the Lectures at the Collège de France 1983-4, *The Courage of the Truth*, for instance, Foucault sees the askēsis of the Greek Cynics, based on "bearing witness", "self-denial", and "personal sacrifice" as "anti-hierarchical" and "anti-institutional" in import (Munro 2014: 1131). Munro (2014) has persuasively argued that such ethical leadership styles are prevalent in contemporary Social Movement Organizations (SMOs) such as Amnesty International, Greenpeace and others. Similarly, Foucault's unrealized project of examining the askēsis of the revolutionary (McGushin 2007, Munro 2014) may be a profitable avenue for leadership scholarship to explore.

[1] Most recently, a new biography, *Becoming Steve Jobs* by Brent Schlender and Rick Tetzeli (2015), has been issued, which has now been deemed the 'best portrayal' of his life by Apple (*New York Times*, March 22nd 2015) in preference to that by Isaacson.

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