

## **Beyond The Divide: Covenantal Authority, Sacred-Secular Permeability, And Leadership Legitimacy in Ghanaian Organizational Contexts**

**Eric Gyan Adjei**

MPhil Candidate (HRM Option)

Catholic University of Ghana, Fiapre-Sunyani

<Email address: [adjeigyane@gmail.com](mailto:adjeigyane@gmail.com)>

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*Abstract: Leadership scholarship in sub-Saharan Africa has been largely influenced by Western theories that draw a strict line between the sacred and secular spheres. This paper challenges that view, proposing instead that in Ghana, these spheres are interconnected within a united communal cosmos—a concept called the Afrocentric Sacred-Secular Permeability Theory (ASSPT). It also introduces the idea of covenantal authority, which highlights leadership legitimacy stemming from divine, communal, and ancestral accountability, in contrast to Western positional authority models. In the Bono Region of Ghana, the paper suggests these propositions represent a significant shift in leadership understanding, with implications for research and practice in sub-Saharan Africa.*

**Keywords:** covenantal authority, sacred-secular permeability, Ubuntu, Christian leadership, leadership legitimacy, Afrocentric organizational theory

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### **INTRODUCTION**

The question of what makes a leader legitimate is not merely a management question. In contexts where institutional and spiritual authority interpenetrate — as they routinely do across sub-Saharan Africa — legitimacy is a far more complex social achievement than Western leadership theory has acknowledged. A head teacher in Sunyani, a health facility administrator in Dormaa, or a small enterprise owner in Techiman does not lead within a secularised institutional space. They lead within a relational cosmos in which divine calling, communal expectation, and inherited cultural norms operate simultaneously, often without clear boundaries between them.

The leadership literature has, in recent decades, begun to take religion and spirituality seriously as organisational variables. Ewest (2015) traces the sociological conditions under which religion re-entered organisational discourse after a period of secularisation assumptions. Allen and Fry (2023) propose integrated frameworks for spiritual and moral development. Tangen (2023) advances a theologically grounded model of Christian leadership as practice. Yet this growing body of scholarship remains overwhelmingly Western in its theoretical base, its empirical samples, and its implicit assumptions about the relationship between institutional and spiritual life.

Africa is represented in this literature largely as a field site rather than a theoretical source. Kretzschmar's (2002) foundational work on authentic Christian leadership in Africa remains one of the few contributions to theorise African Christian leadership from within the continent's own intellectual traditions rather than against them. More recently, Graham (2023) and Sitohang et al. (2024) have addressed the tension Christian leaders' face in secular environments, but their analyses are anchored in Western institutional contexts. Kim, McCalman, and Fisher (2012) interrogate the sacred/secular binary from a business ethics perspective but do not offer an alternative ontological framework to replace it.

This paper responds to that gap. It advances an Afrocentric theoretical framework for understanding how leadership legitimacy is constructed, sustained, and withdrawn in Ghanaian organisational contexts. The framework consists of two core theoretical propositions: the Afrocentric Sacred-Secular Permeability Theory (ASSPT) and the construct of covenantal authority. Together, these propositions argue that the standard Western model of organisational leadership, in which institutional role produces authority, and in which religion is either irrelevant or a personal variable, fails to account for the social architecture of leadership in Ghana and, by extension, much of sub-Saharan Africa.

The paper is structured as follows. Section 2 reviews the relevant literature across three clusters: leadership styles and legitimacy theory, Christian and spiritual leadership, and African organisational scholarship. Section 3 identifies the critical gaps that motivate the theoretical propositions. Section 4 develops the ASSPT framework. Section 5 introduces and elaborates the covenantal authority construct. Section 6 situates the framework in the Bono Region context and discusses implications for research and practice. Section 7 concludes.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

### Leadership Legitimacy and Style: The Western Baseline

Contemporary leadership theory offers a well-developed typology of styles — transformational, transactional, servant, authentic — each with empirical correlates in organisational outcomes. Anderson and Sun (2017) have noted that these typologies significantly overlap and have called for a more integrative framework. Al Khajeh (2018) provides empirical confirmation of the performance consequences of style choice. Marque (2015) argues that the broader leadership landscape has shifted toward relational and values-driven approaches, a trend that opens space for religiously inflected leadership models.

The concept of legitimacy in leadership theory has been predominantly treated as a function of role, competence, or follower attribution (Harrison, 2025). Weber's classic tripartite typology — traditional, charismatic, rational-legal — remains the implicit framework behind most Western accounts of how leaders acquire authority. Notably, this typology was developed from a European sociological tradition that assumed the progressive secularisation of institutional life. Its application to Ghanaian or more broadly African contexts, where traditional authority structures coexist with Christian institutional frameworks and modern organisations, requires theoretical scrutiny rather than simple adoption.

### Christian and Spiritual Leadership

A substantial body of literature addresses the internal, formative dimensions of Christian leadership. Afaradi (2023) proposes a tripartite model of holistic Christian leadership encompassing orthodoxy, orthopraxis, and orthopathy. Norheim (2023) theorises leadership as a distinctly Christian practice, while Tangen (2023) advances the SERVE framework as a structured, Scripture-grounded model. Siahaan et al. (2022) derive leadership competence

criteria from 1 Timothy 3, situating competence within a theological anthropology rather than a management framework.

On the developmental side, Clinton (2018) offers the most widely cited stage-based model of Christian leader formation, arguing that leaders develop through recognisable phases of divine testing and capacity building. Krispin (2020) proposes an outcomes framework for Christian leader development that distinguishes it from generic competency-based approaches. Allen and Fry (2023) and Rothausen (2017) locate spiritual and moral formation at the centre of leader development, with the latter drawing specifically on Ignatian spirituality.

The theme of sacred-secular tension recurs across this literature. Jones, Murray, and Warren (2018) address the challenge of Christian leadership in secular institutional settings. Graham (2023) examines how Christian identity is maintained and expressed in a secular culture. Kim et al. (2012) critique the maintenance of the sacred/secular divide in business contexts as a form of institutional dualism that misrepresents how religiously committed leaders actually operate. These critiques, however, do not arrive at an alternative framework; they identify the problem without resolving it.

### **African Leadership Scholarship: Contributions and Absences**

The literature on African leadership is thinner than one might expect given the demographic weight and rapid organisational development of sub-Saharan Africa. Kretzschmar (2002) remains a foundational text, arguing that authentic Christian leadership in Africa must be grounded in both theological fidelity and contextual relevance — a combination that Western models systematically undervalue. Ubuntu philosophy has attracted growing attention as a theoretical resource for organisational scholarship, with its relational ontology providing an alternative to both the individualism of Western management theory and the institutional abstraction of Weberian authority models.

Dami et al.'s (2022) empirical work on servant leadership demonstrates that trust and leader-member exchange mediate leadership outcomes in ways that resonate with African communal values, though the study does not theorise this resonance explicitly. The absence of empirically grounded, theoretically original leadership scholarship from West Africa specifically — and from Ghana in particular — is notable. The Bono Region, with its combination of strong communal structures, high Christian identification, and a mixed formal-informal economy, represents an under-researched setting with high theoretical yield.

### **The Theoretical Gaps: Four Productive Lacunae**

A close reading of the literature surfaces four interrelated gaps that motivate the theoretical propositions advanced in this paper.

The first is the theology-empirics silo. Normative works in Christian leadership (Tangen, Siahaan, Afaradi) are theologically rich but produce no testable claims. Empirical works (Al Khajeh, Dami et al.) are methodologically rigorous but theologically empty. There is no developed framework that explains how theological commitments generate measurable leadership behaviours — a structural absence that limits the cumulative development of the field.

The second is Western theoretical dominance. With the partial exception of Kretzschmar (2002), the leadership literature — including its Christian and spiritual subfields — has been produced in and for North American and European contexts. The theoretical assumptions embedded in concepts like positional authority, role legitimacy, and the secular organisation

are not self-evident truths but historically specific constructions. Their wholesale importation into African contexts produces category errors.

The third is the formation-development conflation. Clinton (2018), Krispin (2020), and Teo (2017) use 'formation' and 'development' as near-synonyms, but the two concepts rest on different anthropologies. Development implies a deficit of capability to be corrected from outside; formation implies a virtue-trajectory to be cultivated from within. This distinction has direct consequences for how leadership programmes are designed and evaluated.

The fourth, and most theoretically generative for the present paper, is the unresolved sacred-secular binary. Kim et al. (2012), Graham (2023), and Sitohang et al. (2024) correctly identify this binary as an analytical problem, but none provides an alternative ontological framework. This paper supplies one.

The Afrocentric Sacred-Secular Permeability Theory (ASSPT)

### **The Ontological Premise**

The sacred-secular binary, as it operates in Western organisational theory, is a product of the particular history of European secularisation. It assumes that institutional life is or ought to be organised without reference to transcendent claims, and that religious commitment, where present, is a personal variable that operators of organisations may or may not bring to work. This assumption has empirical warrant in certain Northern European and North American contexts. It has essentially no warrant in Ghana.

In Ghanaian life — and more broadly across sub-Saharan Africa — the sacred and the secular do not occupy separate institutional spaces. They function as what this paper terms permeable registers within a unified relational cosmos. A register, in this usage, is a mode of engagement and accountability rather than a bounded domain. Leaders do not move from sacred to secular when they enter the office; they engage, simultaneously and continuously, with obligations that span both registers. The head teacher who opens school assembly with prayer, adjudicates staff disputes by invoking community standards, and makes resource decisions with an eye to both divine favour and ancestral precedent is not moving between domains — they are operating within a single, relationally constituted reality in which all of these accountability channels are present and active.

### **Ubuntu as the Theoretical Anchor**

The philosophical foundation for this argument is provided by Ubuntu — the southern and central African relational ontology most commonly rendered as *umuntu ngumuntu ngabantu*: a person is a person through other persons. Ubuntu locates the person not as an autonomous individual who enters into relationships, but as a relational being whose personhood is constituted through and by community. Leadership, on this account, is not a property of individuals but a function of relational networks. Authority does not inhere in a role; it is conferred, withheld, and withdrawn by the community that the leader inhabits.

This Ubuntu-grounded ontology does not map cleanly onto either the sacred or the secular as Western theory constructs them. The community through which personhood is constituted is simultaneously a social, spiritual, and ancestral community. Obligations to the living, to God, and to the ancestors are not compartmentalised but intertwined. This is not religious syncretism in the pejorative sense; it is an accurate description of the relational structure of moral accountability in Ghanaian life.

### **Permeability as a Theoretical Property**

ASSPT does not argue that the sacred and secular are identical or that no distinction can be made between them. It argues that in Ghanaian contexts, the boundary between them is permeable rather than firm — that legitimising claims flow across it in both directions, and that leaders who attempt to enforce the boundary risk social illegitimacy rather than institutional credibility.

The theory generates a specific and testable prediction: in Ghanaian organisational contexts, leaders who demonstrate visible integration of faith practice, communal accountability, and institutional competence will attract higher follower trust than leaders who compartmentalise these. The compartmentalising leader — who is professionally competent but spiritually disengaged, or devout but communally self-serving — violates the relational expectations of the permeable cosmos and thereby loses legitimacy even if they retain institutional authority.

### **Covenantal Authority: A Contextually Grounded Construct**

#### **The Insufficiency of Positional Authority**

Western management theory has largely theorised authority as positional: it derives from the role one occupies within an institutional hierarchy. Even servant leadership — the framework most amenable to Christian and African relational values — tends to preserve the positional structure by inverting it. The servant leader's authority is still formally grounded in their institutional role; the servanthood modifies how that authority is exercised rather than challenging where it comes from.

In Ghanaian contexts, positional authority is a necessary but not sufficient condition of leadership legitimacy. A manager who holds the role but lacks communal standing will find their instructions resisted, their decisions undermined, and their tenure brief. Conversely, a leader who commands deep communal trust may retain effective authority well beyond the formal limits of their role. The construct of covenantal authority is offered to account for this difference.

#### **Defining Covenantal Authority**

Covenantal authority is the form of leadership legitimacy that arises when a leader is recognised as accountable across three simultaneous channels: the divine, the communal, and the ancestral. These three channels are not independent variables but mutually guaranteeing: credibility in one channel reinforces credibility in the others, and the loss of standing in any one channel produces legitimacy deficit across all three.

The divine channel concerns the perceived alignment between the leader's practice and their expressed relationship with God. In a predominantly Christian context such as the Bono Region, this does not require explicit religious performance in institutional settings. It requires that the leader's moral conduct, decision-making, and care for those they lead be consistent with — and perceived to be motivated by — their Christian commitments. Leaders who are loudly devout but privately self-serving rapidly lose divine channel credibility.

The communal channel concerns the perceived alignment between the leader's practice and the welfare of the community they lead and inhabit. This goes beyond task performance or organisational outcomes. It encompasses how the leader treats people, whether they honour relationships, how they handle conflict, and whether they are seen to be building the community rather than extracting from it. The communal channel is where Ubuntu-grounded accountability is most directly expressed.

The ancestral channel is the most contextually specific of the three and the most likely to be undertheorised by Western-trained researchers. It concerns the perceived alignment between the leader's practice and the inherited moral norms of the community — what we might call the accumulated wisdom of the community's historical experience, transmitted through cultural practice, proverb, elder authority, and the expectations attached to particular social roles. A leader who violates ancestral norms — even if they are professionally competent and personally devout — risks being experienced as culturally illegitimate.

### **Covenantal Authority and Christian Theology**

The term covenantal is deliberately theological. In Christian Scripture, covenant (berith in Hebrew, diatheke in Greek) denotes a binding relational commitment that creates mutual obligations and establishes the conditions of legitimate relationship. Biblical leadership, from Moses to the Servant of Isaiah to the shepherd imagery of John 10, is consistently covenantal in structure: the leader's authority is derived from and answerable to the one who establishes the covenant and it is exercised for the benefit of those with whom the covenant is made.

This theological structure resonates deeply with the Ubuntu relational ontology described above and with the specific form of leadership legitimacy observed in Ghanaian organisational contexts. The leader's authority is not self-generated or role-conferred; it is covenantally constituted through the intersection of divine vocation, communal recognition, and cultural inheritance. This is not merely a metaphor; it describes the actual social architecture of how leaders are made and unmade in communities where these three accountability channels are active.

The Bono Region as Theoretical Site

### **Socio-religious Profile**

The Bono Region of Ghana, with Sunyani as its capital, offers a particularly productive context for testing and developing the theoretical framework advanced here. Christianity is the dominant religious tradition in the region, coexisting with traditional religion in ways that are generally syncretic rather than antagonistic. The regional economy combines formal public sector institutions — health, education, civil service — with a substantial informal sector of small and medium enterprises, petty trade, and agricultural production. Communal and chieftaincy structures remain active sources of social authority alongside and sometimes in tension with modern institutional hierarchies.

This combination means that in any given workplace in the Bono Region, a leader is likely to operate in the presence of followers who hold active expectations across all three accountability channels identified in the covenantal authority framework. The devout follower, the community elder, the young professional shaped by both formal education and traditional culture — all are present, and all bring different but overlapping legitimacy criteria to their evaluation of their leader.

### **Implications for Research**

The ASSPT and covenantal authority frameworks are not merely descriptive; they generate a research agenda. Empirically, the most pressing question is whether leaders who demonstrate coherent integration across the three accountability channels in fact produce higher follower trust and organisational commitment than those who compartmentalise or fail in any one channel. This is directly testable through qualitative phenomenological inquiry — exploring how followers in Bono Region workplaces narrate their experience of and criteria for leadership legitimacy — or through survey-based approaches that operationalise the three channels as constructs.

Theoretically, the framework invites engagement with the structural stigma and moral economy literatures, both of which have been used to theorise how informal social norms shape formal institutional outcomes. Structural stigma theory, developed primarily in mental health contexts, shows how community-level normative structures shape individual-level outcomes in ways that institutional analysis alone cannot capture — a dynamic directly relevant to how covenantal authority operates in Ghanaian organisations. Moral economy frameworks, from Scott (1976) onward, theorise the implicit normative contracts that govern relationships between those with and without institutional power — a framework that resonates with the communal accountability channel of covenantal authority.

### **Implications for Leadership Development Practice**

The theoretical framework also has practical implications for how leadership development is designed and delivered in Ghanaian contexts. If leadership legitimacy is covenantally constituted across three channels, then development programmes that focus exclusively on competency acquisition (the development emphasis) without attending to moral formation and community accountability (the formation emphasis) will produce leaders who are institutionally capable but contextually illegitimate.

This supports the case for an integrated formation-development approach — what the present author has elsewhere theorised as the Formation-Development Dialectic Theory (FDDT) — in which competency development and character formation are understood as mutually conditioning rather than sequential or separable processes. For institutions such as the Catholic University of Ghana and other Ghanaian tertiary institutions offering management and leadership programmes, this implies a curriculum architecture that takes theological anthropology and community accountability as seriously as organisational behaviour and management science.

### **CONCLUSION**

This paper has advanced two interrelated theoretical propositions — the Afrocentric Sacred-Secular Permeability Theory (ASSPT) and the construct of covenantal authority — as contributions toward a contextually grounded theory of leadership legitimacy in Ghanaian organisational contexts. Together, they argue that the standard Western model of organisational authority, grounded in institutional role and secular assumption, fails to account for the social architecture within which leaders actually operate in Ghana and, by implication, much of sub-Saharan Africa.

The central contribution is not to argue that African contexts are unique in some exoticising sense, but to insist that they are different in theoretically significant ways — ways that warrant original theoretical development rather than the continued adaptation of frameworks produced elsewhere. The sacred and secular are permeable in Ghana. Leadership legitimacy is covenantally constituted. These are not merely cultural footnotes to Western leadership theory; they are structural features of a distinct social reality that deserves its own theoretical vocabulary.

The Bono Region of Ghana is offered not merely as a field site but as a theoretical site — a place whose specific socioreligious configuration makes visible the dynamics that ASSPT and covenantal authority are designed to explain. Future research should move from the conceptual work done here toward empirical grounding: testing the covenantal authority framework against the lived experience of leaders and followers in Bono Region workplaces, and building

toward an Afrocentric model of Christian leadership legitimacy that is both theoretically rigorous and practically generative.

The aspiration of this paper is modest in scope but significant in direction: to begin the work of theorising African Christian organisational leadership from African intellectual resources, and in so doing to contribute to a more genuinely global leadership scholarship.

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