

Christian improvisation

An approach to Christian leadership ethics

Martin Jakobsen

Ansgar University College

ABSTRACT

My thesis in this article is that Christian improvisation is a helpful way to understand the practice of Christian leadership ethics. We sometimes find ourselves in ethical situations with no clear script or guideline to prescribe actions. In such cases, the ethical practice is analogous to that of improvisation. I argue that Christian theology and practices can help form a character prepared for improvisation. Moreover, Christian theology can foster an imagination useful for improvisation as it helps us interpret the ethical situation in light of a greater story and creatively imagine new ways of responding.

Keywords: Improvisation, Leadership ethics, Christian ethics, Imagination, The Christian Democratic Party

INTRODUCTION

A week before the 2021 parliamentary election in Norway, leading newspapers wrote about how the leader of The Christian Democratic Party, Kjell Ingolf Ropstad, had a registered address at his parents' house (Torset, Gausen, et al., 2021). On paper, he lived at his parent's house, but in reality, he lived with his wife and children in Oslo. This registration gave some advantages; he could live in one of the parliament's apartments for free without paying a tax for this benefit. When this story broke in the media, how did The Christian Democratic Party and its leader react? This was a new situation they had not come across before; the party or its PR advisors had no prepared scripts guiding what Ropstad should say or how the party should react in this particular situation. They had to improvise.

This case, which I will return to later, illustrates how there are two stages in the moral life. There is the stage of the moral situation, the time when you are faced with a difficult choice. And there is the prior stage of moral formation, the formation of character and habits. In this paper, I argue in favour of the following thesis: *Christian improvisation* is a helpful way to understand the practice of Christian leadership ethics. To do so, I first connect improvisation with ethics by arguing that when you find yourself in a new ethical situation, handling an ethical matter you have not addressed before and have no clear rule or guideline to determine your course of action, the ethical practice is analogous to that of improvisation. After connecting improvisation and ethics, I argue that Christian improvisation is a helpful concept. It is helpful in two ways. First, it is helpful in describing and preparing the leader for situations she will often find herself in, namely that of being in uncharted territory. Second, it is helpful as Christian theology and practices provide resources for preparing for such improvisation, resources concerning character development and cultivating a Christian imagination.

The concept of improvisation, specifically improvisation in jazz, has been used in management literature for 30 years (Hadida et al., 2015). Improvisation is used to illuminate and inform discussions on organisational theory (Weick, 1998), organisational strategy (Hatch, 1997; Hatch & Weick, 1998), organisational learning (Barrett, 2001), innovation (Vera & Crossan, 2005), and leadership (Newton, 2004). In this article, I use the notion of improvisation to talk about ethics. Just as metaphors can be useful when conceptualising leadership (Alvesson & Spicer, 2011) or Christian leadership (Åkerlund, 2021), I suggest that the metaphor of theatre improvisation is useful in the practice of Christian leadership ethics. I think it might prove beneficial not only for leaders but also for anyone confronted with a new ethical situation to view ethical practice as improvisation. However, the notion of improvisation is particularly helpful in the context of leadership ethics. Leadership will often involve real-time problem-solving and handling new issues that one has neither encountered nor planned for. Furthermore, leadership will often involve handling situations without established procedures. For instance, leaders have power, influence, and followers who depend on them. Power and dependency generate moral responsibility, but consulting a rulebook on handling power and dependency in concrete situations has limited use as situations are so diverse.

A vast amount of literature emphasises character formation in the field of ethics, Christian ethics, and leadership. In all these fields of study, a connection is often made between character traits – virtues – and the notion of *phronesis*, understood as practical wisdom or the ability to exercise judgment in particular cases: A single virtue or a virtuous character is not complete without a reliable sensitivity to what virtuous act the concrete situation requires (MacIntyre, 2007, p. 154; McDowell, 1998, p. 51; Newstead & Riggio, 2023, p. xxiv; Russell, 2014, p. 208). My focus on improvisation relates to *phronesis*; both terms concern exercising judgment in particular cases. But improvisation is a narrower notion. One can use one's

judgement without improvising if, for instance, the situation is familiar or the application of rules, norms, or virtues is quite clear. The reasons why I explore the metaphor of theatre improvisation and not *phronesis* are, first, to show that this metaphor used in management literature also applies to ethics, and second, because the metaphor might help us understand and prepare for new ethical situations where we lack a script.

In what follows, I will first explain how I understand improvisation. Then I turn to the first stage in the moral life, that of preparation, arguing that Christian theology and character may help form a Christian character ready for improvisation. Next, I turn to the second stage in the moral life, the moral situation, and lay out how cultivating a Christian imagination may help the moral agent improvise.

IMPROVISATION

There are various definitions of improvisation, all of which serve different purposes. Some might take improvisation to be about “unplanned, unrehearsed, functioning” (Filewod, 2015, p. 378) or “spontaneous creativity with little or nothing planned in advance” (Sarath, 2013, p. 40). Such definitions call attention to the fact that improvisation happens *on the go*, spontaneous and unplanned, but might downplay all preparation and experience that makes one improvise well. Improvisation might not be completely unrehearsed: Building character and accumulating the experience that enables the agent to improvise well might count as a rehearsal.

Some definitions of improvisation emphasise the creativity involved (Heble & Caines, 2015, p. 2; Nettle, 2015, p. 76). The notion of creativity is also useful in the context of ethical improvisation, both in the sense that the agent must come up with (thus create) a proper response on the go and also in the sense that the imagination can help (thus be creative) discover a proper response in an unplanned situation. Some management scholars consider improvisation to be about originality and novelty (Ingram & William Duggan, 2016, p. 386). A focus on originality might be useful if the point is to develop new business. However, for the actor on a stage or the ethical agent, originality is not what you aim for. You aim for familiarity and consistency with the story that frames your improvisation (Wells, 2004, p. 67). In doing so, you might end up being innovative, but lack of innovation or originality is not a sign of bad improvisation. Think about a news anchor delivering news while the teleprompter fails. While improvising, the news anchor does not strive to be new and original but instead aims for familiarity, acting as if there were a script to follow. When this news anchor faces a situation without the reassurance of a script, he handles the new situation by acting “from habits in ways appropriate to the circumstances” (Wells, 2004, p. 65). This example of a news anchor shows that improvisation is hard work. Improvisation – both ethical and theatrical – requires the agent to draw on a lifetime of experience, recontextualise habits and experiences to fit this new and unexpected situation, and do so in “real-time” (Caines, 2015, p. 383).

I understand improvisation as follows: to act in a particular situation without the reassurance of a script. This definition is from Christian ethicist Samuel Wells’s book on improvisation (Wells, 2004, p. 65). This understanding does not rely on improvisation being unrehearsed; improvising well requires rehearsal in the sense of character development and well-formed habits. It does not aim at originality but consistency. However, as I will show later, when the improviser uses their imagination and views the situation within the context of a broader narrative, the improvisation might also be innovative. The phrase *a script* in the definition is quite metaphorical; it alludes to how Wells draws on theatrical improvisation. For this

article, a *script* is something telling you how you must act in a particular situation. It covers ethical or procedural guidelines that not merely suggest but dictate your course of action.¹ There are ethical situations where rules and duties apply and guide our behaviour. In such cases, not much improvisation is needed. But there are also situations in which we have no clear rule or guideline to lean on – it is in these cases I suggest seeing the practice of Christian ethics as improvisation will be useful.

FORMING A CHRISTIAN CHARACTER READY FOR IMPROVISATION

In the wake of philosopher Alasdair MacIntyre's *After Virtue* (1981), a growing number of ethicists see ethics as more about developing character than merely following rules or maximising good consequences. In a Scandinavian theological context, Ivar Asheim develops a Christian virtue ethics where the Bible provides a way of seeing the world – seeing human history, purpose, and meaning – and developing a character who displays proper virtues in situations of ethical deliberation (Asheim, 1994, p. 53). My focus on improvisation fits well in the framework of Christian virtue ethics. Like Asheim and other Christian virtue ethicists, my primary focus is on the ethical significance of character development and how the Christian tradition provides valuable resources in this regard. My contribution lies in my particular focus on how we prepare for and handle situations without the reassurance of a script.

In what follows, I lay out how Christian theology and practices can help the moral agent improvise. Now, I proceed in a manner that reflects Aristotle's differentiation between two forms of virtue (Aristotle, 2000 II 1). What Aristotle calls *virtue of character*, stable virtuous dispositions, arise through practice or habit. So, my first step is to present how Christian practices develop character with dispositions that prepare the agent for improvisation. Aristotle goes on to write that virtue is not merely about having one's heart in the right place. Intellectual virtue, acquired primarily through teaching, is also needed. This is the practical wisdom (*phronesis*) to read the situations correctly and thus give it the proper virtuous response. My second step, then, considers the act of reading the situation. I assert that fostering a Christian imagination enables the agent to view the situation in light of a greater story and creatively imagine new ways of responding. Let me start by showing how a Christian character can be formed through certain ecclesial practices.

The church confesses sin and forgives. In a Church service and in the Lord's prayer, confession relates to salvation; it concerns human's relation to God. However, as theologian Dietrich Bonhoeffer points out, it also concerns our relation to other people (Bonhoeffer, 2015, p. 88; Huber, 2021, p. 43). First, confession builds character in the sense that the agent learns to admit one's fault or tragic situation, and through such confession, turn one's will and life away from sin (which is why *admitting* is the first of the twelve steps of Alcoholics Anonymous). Second, it calls for an honest way of living. In the presence of another Christian, I am permitted to be the sinner I am. I no longer need to pretend otherwise, as what holds this community together is not the lack of our shortcomings; it is the truth and mercy of Jesus Christ that rules. Third, as the Christian community not only confesses but also forgives (John

¹ One might argue that there are always some ethical guidelines, such as not doing unnecessary harm or being honest, that are relevant in any situation. While that might be so, ethical guidelines might not *dictate* the ethical choice in *the particular situation*; it might be an open question which guidelines to apply, how to do so, and which guidelines to grant greater weight in case of a conflict – and all this gives room for improvisation.

20:23), the church should foster a forgiving character. The fact that Jesus points out that humans should forgive each other just as God forgives us, and the use of “everyone” in “forgive us our sins, for we ourselves forgive everyone indebted to us” (Luke 11:4), calls for a generous culture of forgiveness. Now, this practice of forgiveness connects to the theme of *imitatio Christi*. When hearing a confession and offering forgiveness, the Christian stands in for Jesus Christ, acting on his behalf, imitating Christ. And as Christ forgives, he is grace for us. The practice of forgiveness, then, can foster the habit and attitude of being grace for one another.

The church is a worshipping community. When gathering for worship, the church turns to God and expresses, with songs and prayers, that they are in the presence of God. Worship, then, fosters the awareness of standing in the presence of God. First of all, this awareness can come to use in the act of improvisation. When evaluating different courses of action, one can ask oneself: is this act proper in the presence of God? Is it something I can do for God’s glory? Second, the awareness of being in the presence of God enables us to fit our own small stories into the larger story of God (Wells, 2004, p. 82), a point I will return to below. Third, worship impedes egoism. When theologian Paul Tillich talks about God, he uses the term “ultimate concern” (Tillich, 1973, p. 11). He gets to this term by drawing on Mark 12, where Jesus says that you shall love the Lord with all your heart, soul, mind, and strength. To say that you shall love God with all you are and have God as the ultimate concern might give the impression that God is the only thing we should care about. This is not Tillich’s point. God does not eradicate all other concerns; God orders them and gives them significance as the preliminary concerns relate to the ultimate concern: loving both your neighbour and your enemy gains extra significance as it is an actualisation of the love for God. Now, treating God as the ultimate concern and, through worship, reminding oneself that nothing deserves more reverence than God implies that all other concerns must be treated as preliminary concerns. So, the practice of worship wards off egoism as it teaches us that there is something more significant than ourselves.

The encounter with the Spirit forms character. Here, I do not only think of the fruits of the Spirit – in the sense that the Spirit fills the agent with love, forbearance, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control, or other character traits that may make the agent a good improviser (Galatians 5) – I also think of the agent being open to being led by the Spirit. The Christian is never left alone in the ethical situation – the help and assistance of the Spirit are available. The act of improvisation, then, is concerned with discernment. It is about attending to the Spirit through trained listening (Wells, 2004, p. 66). Such trained listening can be whatever practices that make us pay attention to where and how God reveals himself, makes us live in the space the Spirit creates for us, and makes us distinguish his voice from others – for instance, practises such as meditation on the Word, prayer, confession, spiritual direction, worship, and communion (Dahill, 2002, p. 45). Karl Barth is an example of a theologian who develops ethical implications of the view that God is always present and acting. Barth holds that God deals with and communicates with man in a variety of different ways, some more subtle than others, so that God tells us “very concretely what he is to do or not do here and now in these or those particular circumstances” (Barth, 1981, p. 33). There is a profound confidence in Barth that God speaks to and guides the ethical agent and that the agent can (with God’s help) hear him. (Biggar, 1993, p. 164; Nimmo, 2007, p. 18).²

² Barth’s ethics focus on being attentive to the guidance of The Word of God and the actions commanded by God. The gist of this article, developing a character better able to discern God’s will in the concrete situation, is somewhat underdeveloped in Barth. (Rasmusson, 2017, p. 257)

The encounter with Jesus Christ and the Word of God forms character. When Bonhoeffer encountered Jesus Christ in a new, more personal way, this changed how Bonhoeffer related to himself, God, and other humans (Huber, 2021, p. 94). Not only does this encounter give a new view of the world, but it also gives a new seriousness to the moral life. Ethics, for Bonhoeffer, is an ethics of discipleship; it concerns the Christian life – and it is an ethics of formation; it concerns conforming to the image of Christ, letting the incarnated, crucified and risen Jesus Christ take form among his people (Bonhoeffer, 2003; Huber, 2021, p. 85). So, Christian practices develop character with dispositions that prepare the agent for improvisation. I will now turn to how Christian theology may impact how the agent sees the particular situation and, consequentially, what response it calls for.

IMAGINATION

Theologian Alister McGrath emphasises how the imagination is active in our interpretation of the world. Imagination helps us ask “what if?”-questions such as “what if I imagine myself in your shoes and saw this situation with your eyes?” A Christian imagination makes us ask, “what if I saw this situation in light of the Christian narrative?” Such a way of viewing the world, says McGrath, enables us to see the world in a richer and deeper sense – to see things as they really are (McGrath, 2017, p. 43). This is a divinely transformed capacity, a gift of the Spirit (Romans 12:2), which McGrath calls a “baptised imagination” (C. S. Lewis, 1984, p. 181; McGrath, 2017, p. 42).

McGrath sometimes describes the baptised imagination as something granted rather than controlled. Like my point above – that encountering Christ and the Spirit form character – McGrath treats the baptised imagination as a capacity granted by the Spirit that renews our minds and makes us see the world anew. But he also gives some account of how this new way of seeing the world works. Everyone needs some framework or lens to understand the world and its meaning. We see the world in its true light when adopting a Christian framework to see (and evaluate) the world. This framework is “provided by sustained, detailed, extended reflection on the Christian narrative, which is articulated and enacted in the life and witness of the Church” (McGrath, 2017, p. 56). McGrath sees the imagination as part of our conscious reflection (as opposed to Smith, 2013, p. 19). But it is more than that. First, imagination not only concerns our minds but also our hearts. Imagining myself as created, called, and loved by God makes me think and feel differently than a more nihilistic or pessimistic view. Second, the role of practice is key: how we imagine our place in the world is not only due to the teaching of the church but also the practice and life of the church – and the church is to embody, narrate and proclaim this vision of reality. Third, he emphasises the key role of narrative. When seeing our stories in light of God’s redemption story or our situation in light of the story of Christ, we might discover a richer or deeper meaning than first anticipated; we might see things as important that we used to see as insignificant; we might reject limiting categories that we used to take for granted – in short, we might imagine the world anew.

Wells also emphasises the imagination and its connection to narrative. While McGrath’s main focus is on how seeing our story in light of a greater story gives new meaning to the situation we find ourselves in, Wells’s main point is on how the narrative informs our response to the situation; it informs our improvisation. Wells asks us to imagine how actors would act out a Shakespeare play whose fifth act had been lost:

The “authority” of the first four acts would not consist in an implicit command that the actors should repeat the earlier parts of the play over and over again. It would consist in the fact of an as yet unfinished drama, which contained its own impetus, its own forward movement, which demanded to be concluded in the proper manner but which required of the actors a responsible entering in to the story as it stood, in order first to understand how the threads could appropriately be drawn together, and then to put that understanding into effect by speaking and acting with both innovation and consistency. (Wright, 1989, pp. 18–19 in Wells, 2004, p. 51)

Christian improvisation unfolds not within Shakespeare’s story but within God’s narrative. We find ourselves in an act for which there is no script. But this ongoing unwritten act is not without context. The earlier acts (Creation and Fall, Israel, Jesus, the Church) and the final act (eschatology) give it meaning and the context needed for us to enact it. While good Shakespearean improvisers have immersed themselves in Shakespeare and perform the unwritten act true to that whole narrative, a good Christian improvisation performs the unwritten act true to the Christian narrative.³ To improvise this unscripted act, says Wells, is not to repeat the previous acts but to draw upon them. We let God’s previous acts and God’s future determine how we see our role and how we ought to act. Imagining our situation as a part of God’s story might open us up to new courses of action, perhaps surprising ones, that are visible and feasible to Christians in a way they might not be to others.

Let’s turn to the example of Ropstad, who faced massive media pressure for having lived in one of the parliament’s apartments for free.⁴ This case is a good example of how one use of the imagination, namely in interpreting the situation, is connected to another use of the imagination, namely in imagining new ways of handling the unplanned situation. It is not at all obvious how to interpret what sort of situation Ropstad and the Christian Democratic Party found themselves in. What sort of narrative should determine how they view the massive media pressure? As the story broke just a week before the election – and as the media singled out Ropstad while it turned out that 37 other politicians arranged their living similarly – it is reasonable to see it as a witch hunt by the media. As news articles and public debates are formulated around juridical and procedural matters, it is reasonable to interpret them as a case of whether laws have been broken or not. As news editorials emphasise that what Ropstad did for financial gains may hurt the public’s trust in politicians, it is reasonable to interpret this as a moral matter. Such different understandings of the situation will strongly influence how the situation is handled: Interpreting this situation as a PR scandal calls for repeating the message that “I am sorry”; interpreting the situation as a witch hunt calls for trying to expose the media and shut down the story. To start with, The Christian Democratic Party treated the case as a legal matter. Ropstad ensured the public that this registration was legal, that the parliament’s administration had approved everything, and consequentially that there was no need to pay back any tax benefit, but that he nevertheless was “sorry for this matter” (Heiervang et al., 2021). Then, Ropstad treated it as a prudential matter, trying to explain to the public why, at the time, it seemed reasonable to accept one of the parliament’s apartments (NRK, 2021).

³ Here, I take a Christian improvisation to qualify as good when it is authentically Christian (Søvik, 2011, Chapter 7), just as Shakespearean improvisation is good when it is authentically Shakespearean. I could also make the argument that enacting God’s story, intention, and purpose, for his creation is not only good given this Christian point of view but truly and objectively good – but making that argument would involve additional steps.

⁴ In laying out this case, I do not mean to single out Ropstad as the single responsible agent for how the party reacts. The responsibility is shared with the PR advisors and the staff.

Later, he treated the case more as a moral matter, stating that he had arranged his living situation to save tax (around 16.000 USD/year), that he regretted the desertion and was sorry (Norum et al., 2021). None of these responses seemed to satisfy the public. After 13 days of pressure from the media and 13 days of stating that he was sorry for the situation, Ropstad withdrew as leader of the party.

Ropstad, the party, and its PR advisors could have interpreted the situation differently. Their interpretation is not very imaginative; they grant the premises of the media. Moreover, committing oneself to a certain interpretation of the situation – like *this is a legal matter* or *this is a witch hunt* – can be quite limiting when it comes to imagining different responses. In what follows, I propose that they could have adopted a more imaginative interpretation, seeing the situation in light of a more significant narrative than the premises and accusations implied by the media.

OVERACCEPTING

When Wells expands on how an imaginative interpretation relates to the agent's imagination of possible responses, he turns to a concept in theatrical improvisation called *overaccepting* (Wells, 2004, p. 131, 2016, p. 546). When actors say or do anything, like “Bam! You are dead!” they make an *offer*. Here, you have three options. You can *accept* (fall down), you can *block* the offer, reject the premises (“no, I’m not!”), or you can *overaccept*. This is to accept the premises but to do so in light of a larger story, presenting a much larger canvas than what was imagined by the person making the offer. Wells illustrates this with an interview with Princess Diana (Wells, 2004, p. 131). She got asked whether she thinks she will ever be queen. Her reply: “I’d like to be a queen of people’s hearts.” Diana is not rejecting the premise that her predicament is awkward and complicated and that her situation has a sadness to it; she is accepting all that and overaccepting it by placing herself in a more significant narrative.

In the New Testament, we find Jesus constantly overaccepting. When the devil tempts him to make bread out of stones, he responds that man does not live on bread alone, but on every word that comes from the mouth of God (Matthew 4:4). In the Sermon on the Mount, he overaccepts the mosaic law and its function (Matthew 5). When the Pharisees ask whether one should pay tax to Caesar, Jesus overaccepts their point of who to express loyalty towards (Matthew 22). When facing expectations of being the Messiah and ruling the kingdom, Jesus overaccepts by stating that his kingdom is not of this world (John 18:36). In the end, Jesus even overaccepts death itself.

Let me return to the case of Ropstad and suggest how an imaginative interpretation, using a baptised imagination, might have revealed a new set of responses, allowing for an improvisation where they could have *overaccepted* the *offers* of the media.⁵

The Christian Democratic Party could have imagined the situation as a possibility to show who they really are and what they really stand for. New Testament texts about Jesus and the Pharisees could inspire such an approach. There are numerous stories of Pharisees challenging Jesus and putting him on the spot (Matthew 12, 15, 16, 19, 20, 22). Instead of going on the defensive, Jesus interprets the situation as an opportunity to showcase the kingdom of

⁵ I do this with great respect for Ropstad. It is obviously way easier for me to evaluate in hindsight and construct a possible script than for him to improvise when faced with enormous media pressure.

God. Jesus' response, then, is more than just a reaction to the premises and accusations of the Pharisees; it is overaccepting and often surprising.

Jesus is able to see the situation as an opportunity to showcase the kingdom of God precisely because he sees his life as an event in God's grand narrative, not as an isolated event. Now, seeing ourselves as characters in God's story makes us realise that we are not the main character. Wells points out that we can never be the hero of the story, but we can be a saint (Wells, 2004, p. 43). The hero's story is always about the hero. Seeing ourselves as playing a part in God's story, we realise that we are not at the centre and that the story is not about us. The saint's story, however, is not about the saint; it points at something greater. The saint's story is not told to celebrate the saint's virtues but to showcase an icon pointing beyond itself. So, suppose Ropstad and the Christian Democratic Party saw this situation in light of a grand narrative, such as God's story. In that case, they might more easily have seen the situation as a possible icon that could point beyond the leader of the party. The accusations could be an opportunity to show who they really are.

If the public accusations are an opportunity to show who they really are, the next question would then be: who are they really? As a Christian immersed in God's story, Ropstad could see himself as a fallen man who confesses his sin, repent, and try to realise a society inspired by the kingdom of God. Such a view of the situation might call for a public confession – not just a general apology regarding the situation or expressing a wish that you had acted otherwise but a confession identifying the sin: confessing one's greed. Responding in this way is *overaccepting* as it presupposes a more significant narrative than what is apparently present: the problem is not merely whether rules or regulations were broken; the problem is that I am broken. A response along these lines is not out of reach for the churchgoer who regularly confesses sin and thus has fostered the habit of confessing sin in other contexts as well. Now, Ropstad came quite close to this in an admirable interview five months after the case appeared. In this interview, conducted by a pastor, he declared that he had exploited the system to get some personal gain and that he should have been a better role model (Ropstad, 2022, p. 3). Interestingly, the media seemed to react with more compassion and understanding after this confession-like apology than what they did after he attempted to say *I am sorry* when the case erupted.

Moreover, the story of Zacchaeus could be helpful in this act of improvisation. Ropstad could have started a press conference by telling the story of a government employee named Zacchaeus, who had a position that enabled him to exploit rules and regulations for personal gain (Bailey, 2008, p. 176). Following this, I recommend that he should have quoted Zacchaeus, stating, "if I have defrauded anyone of anything, I will pay back four times as much" (Luke 19:8). While such a response would cost a lot of money, perhaps as much as 180 000 USD (Torset, Venli, et al., 2021), it might not have cost the leader his job. Moreover, this overaccepting response could have strengthened the party's identity and public reputation, showing who they really are – a community that sees itself in light of a more significant narrative than other parties.

Zacchaeus' decision to repay "four times as much" is not arbitrary. The law of Moses distinguishes between wrongdoing committed with and without intent. When wrongdoing is intentional, the wrongdoer must compensate four or five times the value (Ex 22:1). In cases of unintentional wrongdoing, the wrongdoer must only compensate for the loss (Ex 21:36). In the case at hand, the intentions were mixed. Ropstad did not intend to break any laws or procedures. He got approval from the parliament's administration, which gave him reason to state, at an early stage, that there was no need to pay back any tax benefit. However, in the later confession, he admitted an intent to exploit the system for personal gain. Given these

mixed intentions, it may not be entirely clear whether the appropriate response is simply compensating the loss or following my suggestion to provide compensation fourfold.

Zacchaeus did not only state that he would pay back fourfold to anyone he has cheated. He would also give 50 per cent of his assets to the poor.⁶ In this, he not only acknowledges that he has intentionally wronged people but also goes beyond what the law requires of him to demonstrate his regret and sincerity. What prompted this radical change of heart? Being in the presence of Jesus, Zacchaeus realised that the proper response is to confess and do penance in a manner that demonstrates his sincerity. Having received costly love, he publicly commits himself to begin showing costly love to the community he had harmed. This sort of response is not out of reach for the churchgoer who belongs to a worshipping community, regularly having an awareness of being in the presence of God. As argued above, this awareness encourages fitting our personal stories into God's redemptive narrative. Viewing oneself as a forgiven recipient of costly love and a beneficiary of atonement prepares the improvising agent to acknowledge the need for repentance and atonement in their own small stories. Moreover, worship impedes egoism; it impedes the reflex to calculate the minimum sacrifice required to demonstrate regret (can I get away with paying nothing back? Only a little?). Worship fosters supererogatory acts; worship is not about meeting a minimum requirement but about offering one's devotion, time, or resources with a pure heart. So, worship can prepare the moral agent to improvise in difficult situations in a manner similar to Zacchaeus by going beyond what is required to demonstrate regret, sincerity, and costly love.

CONCLUSION

Seeing the practice of Christian ethics as Christian improvisation is not the one and only approach to Christian ethics, but it is a useful approach to leadership ethics, which often involves situations where you must act without the reassurance of a script. I have argued that Christian theology and practises can prepare and enable the agent to be a good improviser; Christian habits, community, biblical stories, and encounters with God are part of a character formation that enables good improvisation. Moreover, Christian theology can help expand the agent's imagination, seeing the situation in light of a larger story, which helps the agent creatively imagine new ways of responding.

⁶ It is not clear whether Zacchaeus can be taken literally here. Giving half his assets and compensating fourfold is only possible if he defrauded quite few people. In traditional Middle Eastern style, he might be exaggerating to demonstrate his sincerity (Bailey, 2008, p. 181).

LITERATURE

- Åkerlund, T. (2021). Taking Ownership of Our Spirituality: Pentecostal Leaders as Liturgical Directors. *Journal of Pentecostal Theology*, 31(1), 114–132. <https://doi.org/10.1163/17455251-bja10020>
- Alvesson, M., & Spicer, A. (Eds.). (2011). *Metaphors we lead by: Understanding leadership in the real world*. Routledge.
- Aristotle. (2000). *Nicomachean ethics* (R. Crisp, Ed. & Trans.). Cambridge University Press.
- Asheim, I. (1994). *Mer enn normer – grunnlagsetikk*. Gjøvik Trykkeri AS.
- Bailey, K. E. (2008). *Jesus Through Middle Eastern Eyes: Cultural Studies in the Gospels*. IVP Academic.
- Barrett, F. J. (2001). Creativity and improvisation in jazz and organizations: Implications for organizational learning. In M. P. E. Cunha, K. N. Kamoche, & J. V. da Cunha (Eds.), *Organizational Improvisation* (pp. 138–165). Routledge.
- Barth, K. (1981). *Church Dogmatics: Vol. IV, 4*. Hendrickson Publishers.
- Biggar, N. (1993). *The Hastening that Waits: Karl Barth's Ethics*. Clarendon Press.
- Bonhoeffer, D. (2003). *Discipleship: Dietrich Bonhoeffer Works, Volume 4* (New edition). Fortress Press.
- Bonhoeffer, D. (2015). *Life Together* (Reader's edition). Fortress Press.
- Caines, R. (2015). Improvised Surprise: Opening Statements. In R. Caines & A. Heble (Eds.), *The improvisation studies reader: Spontaneous acts* (pp. 383–385). Routledge.
- Chappell, S. G. (2017). *Knowing What to Do: Imagination, Virtue, and Platonism in Ethics*. Oxford University Press.
- Dahill, L. E. (2002). Probing the Will of God: Bonhoeffer and Discernment. *Dialog*, 41(1), 42–49. <https://doi.org/10.1111/1540-6385.00098>
- Filewod, A. (2015). Improvisation and Theatrical Power: From Discipline to Refusal. In R. Caines & A. Heble (Eds.), *The improvisation studies reader: Spontaneous acts* (pp. 374–379). Routledge.
- Hadida, A. L., Tarvainen, W., & Rose, J. (2015). Organizational Improvisation: A Consolidating Review and Framework. *International Journal of Management Reviews*, 17(4), 437–459. <https://doi.org/10.1111/ijmr.12047>
- Hatch, M. J. (1997). Jazzing Up the Theory of Organizational Improvisation. *Advances in Strategic Management*, 14, 181–191.
- Hatch, M. J., & Weick, K. E. (1998). Critical Resistance to the Jazz Metaphor. *Organization Science*, 9(5), 600–604.
- Heble, A., & Caines, R. (2015). Prologue: Spontaneous Acts. In R. Caines & A. Heble (Eds.), *The improvisation studies reader: Spontaneous acts* (pp. 1–5). Routledge.
- Heiervang, C. H., Grimstad, T., Randen, A., Espeland, A. J., Carlsen, H., Kjelland-Mørdre, I., & Norum, H. (2021, September 6). Vil ikke betale noe tilbake. NRK. https://www.nrk.no/norge/ropstad_-_jeg-er-lei-meg-for-denne-saken-1.15638115
- Huber, R. (2021). *Dietrich Bonhoeffer's Ethics of Formation*. Fortress Academic.
- Ingram, P. & William Duggan. (2016). Improvisation in Management. In G. Lewis & B. Piekut (Eds.), *The Oxford handbook of critical improvisation studies* (pp. 385–395). Oxford University Press.
- Lewis, C. S. (1984). *Surprised by Joy*. Harcourt, Brace & World.
- MacIntyre, A. (2007). *After virtue: A study in moral theory*. Duckworth.
- McDowell, J. H. (1998). *Mind, Value, and Reality* (2. print). Harvard University Press.
- McGrath, A. E. (2017). *Re-Imagining Nature: The Promise of a Christian Natural Theology*. Wiley Blackwell.
- Nettl, B. (2015). Thoughts on Improvisation: A Comparative Approach. In R. Caines & A. Heble (Eds.), *The improvisation studies reader: Spontaneous acts* (pp. 69–78). Routledge.
- Newstead, T. P., & Riggio, R. (Eds.). (2023). *Leadership and virtues: Understanding and practicing good leadership*. Routledge, Taylor & Francis Group.

- Newton, P. M. (2004). Leadership Lessons from Jazz Improvisation. *International Journal of Leadership in Education*, 7(1), 83–99. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13603120409510591>
- Nimmo, P. T. (2007). *Being in Action: The Theological Shape of Barth's Ethical Vision*. T & T Clark.
- Norum, H., Randen, A., Bolstad, J., Cantero, C., Zondag, M. H. W., Kristensen, M., & Molde, E. (2021, September 17). Ropstad innrømmer «skatte-finte» med statsrådsbolig. NRK. <https://www.nrk.no/norge/ropstad-innrømmer-at-han-tok-grep-for-a-slippe-skatt-pa-pendlerboligen-1.15655811>
- NRK (Director). (2021, September 6). *Dagsnytt 18*. <https://tv.nrk.no/serie/dagsnytt-atten-tv>
- Rasmusson, A. (2017). Theology and Moral Reflection and Practice: Karl Barth, David Had-dorff, and Christian Ethics. *Pro Ecclesia: A Journal of Catholic and Evangelical Theology*, 26(3), 249–260. <https://doi.org/10.1177/106385121702600301>
- Ropstad, K. I. (2022, February 6). *Å stå i stormen—Plussprat episode 1, sesong 3* (E. Svartdahl, Interviewer) [Interview]. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zHakkAn-BJ4>
- Russell, D. C. (2014). Phronesis and the Virtues. In R. Polansky (Ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to Aristotle's Nicomachean Ethics* (1st ed., pp. 203–220). Cambridge University Press. <https://doi.org/10.1017/CCO9781139022484>
- Sarath, E. (2013). *Improvisation, creativity, and consciousness: Jazz as integral template for music, education, and society*. State University of New York Press.
- Smith, J. K. A. (2013). *Imagining the kingdom: How worship works*. Baker Academic.
- Søvik, A. O. (2011). *The Problem of Evil and the Power of God*. Brill.
- Tillich, P. (1973). *Systematic Theology* (Vol. 1). University of Chicago Press.
- Torset, N. S., Gausen, S., & Venli, V. (2021, September 5). Ropstad meldte flytting fra gutterommet først i fjor. Derfor fikk han gratis bolig fra Stortinget. *Aftenposten*. <https://www.aftenposten.no/norge/politikk/i/x8Pewn/ropstad-meldte-flytting-fra-gutterommet-foerst-i-fjor-derfor-fikk-han-gratis-bolig-fra-stortinget>
- Torset, N. S., Venli, V., & Gausen, S. (2021, September 18). *KrF-lederen har betalt minst 680.000 kroner for lite skatt på pendlerboligene*. *Aftenposten*. <https://www.aftenposten.no/norge/politikk/i/k6p0ek/krf-leder-kjell-ingolf-ropstad-har-betalt-minst-680000-kroner-for-lite-skatt-paa-pendlerboligene>
- Vera, D., & Crossan, M. (2005). Improvisation and Innovative Performance in Teams. *Organization Science*, 16, 203–224. <https://doi.org/10.1287/orsc.1050.0126>
- Weick, K. E. (1998). Improvisation as a Mindset for Organizational Analysis. *Organization Science*, 9(5), 543–555.
- Wells, S. (2004). *Improvisation: The Drama of Christian Ethics*. Brazos Press.
- Wells, S. (2016). Improvisation and Ecclesial Ethics. In G. Lewis & B. Piekut (Eds.), *The Oxford handbook of critical improvisation studies* (pp. 539–551). Oxford University Press.
- Wright, N. T. (1989). How Can The Bible Be Authoritative? *Vox Evangelica*, 21, 7–32.

Martin Jakobsen (1989) works primarily in Christian ethics, metaethics, philosophical theology, and natural theology. He is an Associate Professor in systematic theology at Ansgar University College in Norway. Jakobsen@ansgarskolen.no

- Jakobsen, M. (2023). A Christological Critique of Divine Command Theory. *Religions*, 14(4), 558. <https://doi.org/10.3390/rel14040558>
- Jakobsen, M. (2022). Et attraktivt liv: Hvordan formidle kristen etikk i et pluralistisk samfunn? *Dansk Tidsskrift for Teologi Og Kirke*, 49(2), 119–135.
- Jakobsen, M. (2021). Are Moral Values Overriding? How Beauty Challenges Robert Adams's Theory of Value. *Journal of Religious Ethics*, 49(4), 681–693. <https://doi.org/10.1111/jore.12374>