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A Modest History of the Concept of Service as Leadership in Four Religious Traditions

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I see our society as urgently in need of strengthening. Awareness of the pervasive alienation among contemporary young people in our country suggests that nurturing the human spirit could become a unifying idea. With all the diversity of religious beliefs and non-beliefs, there is a chance that substantial consensus could be achieved in searching for a basis for this unifying idea in our history and myth.

(Robert K. Greenleaf, 1996d: p. 44)

The current turn to spirituality and values-based leadership

Contemporary public discourse and scholarly interests have been marked by an increasing interest in the phenomena of spirituality (Bekker, 2008a) and this interest has reached the fields of business, economics, commerce and leadership studies (Singh Sengupta, 2007). Kourie (2006) proposes three broad reasons for the current turn to spirituality:

- a shift from mono-cultural communities to multicultural, polycentric societies that is marked with a determined move from divergence to convergence
- a growing dissatisfaction with established forms of spirituality that finds its expression in deep spiritual hunger and a desire for existential meaning
- a Gestalt shift in the rise of postmodernism that rejects the extreme individualism, secularism, materialism and nihilism of modernity.



This current turn to spirituality coincides with the emergence of alternative, post-industrial and global paradigms of leadership where leadership is re-imagined as acts of virtue in community and mutuality, rather than the strivings of power and prestige by one privileged individual (Bekker, 2008a). This paradigm shift from extreme individualism to perspectives in communal leadership is a global phenomenon and is contrasted by the individualistic, competitive leadership approaches of the past (Lipman-Blumen, 1996). No other virtues-based theory of leadership embodies this global shift in leadership perspective and application more than Robert K. Greenleaf's concept of servant leadership. This chapter seeks to explore the emerging nature of this shift in leadership philosophies by locating the spirituality of Greenleaf's concept of servant leadership and comparing it with the rich ground of religious philosophies and examples of service in leadership that is evident in four of the world's older religious traditions: Judaism, Buddhism, Christianity, and Islam.

Contemporary theological research in spirituality – characterized by multi-disciplinary, post-patriarchal, telluric and post-structuralist approaches – locates the phenomena of 'spirit' in the ontology of values (Kourie, 2006). Thus defined, spirituality is seen as the 'ultimate' or 'inner' values that provide meaning in life. This broad, defining approach provides a platform for scholars to examine a wide variety of spiritualities, ranging from religious to secular orientations. This trend in theological research of spirituality is thus no longer limited to religious contexts and has also been observed in the fields of business, commerce and leadership studies (Winston, 2002). The current approaches in spirituality research advocate a 'dialogical-phenomenological' research approach making use of the analytical, hermeneutic, mystagogic, form-descriptive, and systematic tools of theology, sociology and psychology (Kourie, 2006). This is rich ground to explore the spiritualities that motivate, energize and sustain the phenomena of values-based approaches to leadership, such as servant leadership.

Current phenomenological investigations in spirituality research distinguish three basic forms of spirituality (Waaijman, 2006):

- established schools of spirituality
- primordial spiritualities
- counter-spirituality.

Descriptions of established schools of spirituality (Waaijman, 2006) describe movements that have their origins in specific historical and socio-cultural settings that, over time, give rise to discernable schools or ways of the 'spirit'. Research of these established schools or ways of spirituality

are marked by investigations of the source-experience, the formation of pedagogical systems, the socio-historical context, the emergence of a value system, the formation of the consistent whole and accessibility of others to the school or way. Primordial spirituality research attempts to locate spiritualities that are not closely connected with any school or way but, rather, are embedded in ordinary human experiences such as birth, marriage, having children, and experiencing death and suffering. Investigations in primordial spiritualities centre around descriptions of everyday spirituality developed in the context of community, forms of indigenous spiritualities, and aspects of secular spirituality. Counter-movements in spirituality describe approaches that offer alternative solutions to existing social and religious power structures, and the research in these fields follows descriptions of systems of liminality, inferiority, and marginality. Greenleaf's concept of servant as leader can best be described within the domains of counter-movements of spirituality.

Greenleaf's counter-spirituality of service

In an unpublished and undated document archived at the Greenleaf Center, entitled 'The Primacy of Visions' (Fraker and Spears, 1996), Greenleaf described the sources of his concept of and efforts to promote servant leadership:

Five ideas seem to me to have shaped the course of my life work. They were the servant model of my father in my early years; the advice of my professor to get into a large institution, stay there, and become a meliorative force; at age twenty-five, beginning to read E.B. White, sensing his great art of seeing things whole, and learning to practice that art; the advice of Elmer Davis at age forty to begin to prepare for a useful old age; and at age sixty-five reading Hermann Hesse's *Journey to the East* and seeing the vivid dramatization of the servant as leader. These ideas sustained me in my work from youth onward and have had increasing force as I have grown older. (p. 43)

In this excerpt from the Fraker and Spears' unpublished document, Greenleaf identifies five 'ideas' that shaped his life-long quest to define leaders as servants:

- the model of paternal service
- the value of employment stability as a source of organizational transformation

- the integrative worldview philosophies of the children's books author E.B. White (author of the well-known books *Stuart Little* and *Charlotte's Web*)
- the belief in the communal value and service of older persons
- the theosophy inspired philosophies of Herman Hesse, chiefly in the book *Journey to East*, a book that came to embody the values of the counter-cultural, 'hippie' movement of the 1960s.

In one or more ways, all five of Greenleaf's source 'ideas' describe a counter-cultural approach to life and society that has at its core values that promote personal and communal transformation. This is in step with Greenleaf's own faith tradition, that of Quakerism. The Christian witness and spirituality of George Fox and the Quaker movement has been described as that of a counter-movement of spirituality (Bekker, 2008b). Greenleaf (1996a) described the spirituality of Fox and the early Quakers as one of counter-action, ethical regeneration, societal reformation and organizational transformation, thus a good example of a counter-movement of spirituality:

What made George Fox's service to seekers (and their response to him) so exemplary was the significant move to new and more exacting ethical standards, the force of which carries to this day. Fox's major contribution was not his theology, nor even his encouragement to care for suffering – important as these were. Rather, it seems to me, what gave durability to the Quaker tradition was the practical result that so many of those who called themselves Friends behaved more lovingly toward all creatures and assumed an impressive level of responsibility for their society and its institutions. Perhaps the most innovative result was that, by the effort of those whom Fox inspired, the quality of some contemporary institutions, notably commerce, was markedly improved. (p. 299)

It is this counter-cultural aspect of Greenleaf's vision of servant leadership that clearly delineates the spirituality of Greenleaf as a counter-movement. One of the clearest descriptions of Greenleaf's (1996c) counter-spirituality of service lies in his frequent use of the designation of prophet to describe servant-leaders: 'One is at once, in every moment of time, historian, contemporary analyst, and prophet – not three separate roles. This is what the practicing leader is, every day of his life' (p. 15). The leader as prophet is a designation that has been defined and explored in scholarly descriptions of religious leadership (McClymond, 2001). Weber (1968) defines

the prophet as 'a purely individual bearer of charisma who by virtue of his mission proclaims a religious doctrine or divine commandment' (p. 46).

McClymond (2001) goes further and explains that a prophet is an 'agent of change who takes personal responsibility for breaking with the established order, declaring this break to be morally legitimate and influencing others to follow his or her example in breaking away' (p. 622). Greenleaf's vision of servant-leaders as prophets embodies this counter-cultural approach of morality and organizational transformation, and sought to influence others with his 'subversive' message of servant leading. Quay (1997: p. 84) rightfully notes, 'Greenleaf was more than a moralist, he was an evangelist. He preached to managers about how things might be in an utopian world, and how they might become servant-leaders in such a world'.

Greenleaf's concepts of servant leadership and the leader as both servant and prophet can best be described as a form of counter-spirituality that expresses itself in a dynamic system of social marginality. Greenleaf's servant-leader seeks to bridge the two opposing worlds of self-interested commerce and the altruistic philosophies of public service and social transformation. Greenleaf proposes that the servant-leader is a prophet that facilitates the formation of a new vision that unites and transforms (both individually and societally). These leaders bridge the world of commerce and community, and, by doing so, create new possibilities of widespread societal transformation that ushers in a new era of radical mutualism best expressed in service. Greenleaf's vision of the servant-leader as prophet is consistent with the prophetic and often subversive call in counter-spirituality that offers an alternative vision for individual and societal identity and organization. In a dynamic system of marginality (double-loyalty), Greenleaf imagines a new world where leaders are servants, and servants are prophets. Greenleaf's new world is marked by service, equality, unity and new possibilities of radical altruism. Greenleaf invites leaders to become nurturers of the spirit and prophets that will influence their times as a constructive force.

Max Weber's theory of religious leadership, and the concept of service and leadership in four religious traditions

It is surprising, with the relative increase in scholarly focus on the phenomena of leadership, to see how leadership scholars in modernity and post-modernity have largely ignored the topic of religious leadership (McClymond, 2001). There has been little advance in theoretical perspectives in the processes of religious leadership in the twentieth

century (Lindt, 1986) beyond the pioneering sociological studies of Weber (1968) and Wach (1944). But, the turn of the century and the accompanying turn to spirituality have produced a focused return to the scholarly study of religious leadership (Freedman and McClymond, 2001), and few comparative efforts to find common philosophical and ethical foundations for leadership within the tenets of world religions (McClymond, 2001; Kriger and Seng, 2005; Wallace, 2006). Weber's original description of religious leaders identified three distinct kinds of religious leaders: magicians, priests, and prophets. Magicians as religious leaders exert influence by 'virtue or personal gifts made manifest in miracles' (McClymond, 2001: p. 622), priestly leaders are described as 'functionaries of a regularly organized and permanent enterprise concerned with influencing the gods' (Weber, 1968: p. 28), and, finally, prophetic leaders seek to confront the status quo of cultural and religious traditions based on a renewed ethical call or personal mission (Weber, 1968: pp. 54-5). It is Weber's designation of the religious leader as prophet that resonates mostly deeply with Greenleaf's vision of leader as servant. Weber's description of the religious leader as prophet includes two sub-categories: the ethical prophet and the exemplary prophet. The servant-leader as prophet fits both categories. The servant-leader seeks to lead from an ethical foundation of altruistic love and seeks to cultivate the formation of servant leadership in the followers.

McClymond (2001), in seeking to extend and apply Weber's (1968) theory of religious leadership, proposed four themes that delineate and describe the leadership of religious founders of world religions as acts of: reaffirmation, radicalization, ritualization, and responsiveness. Religious leaders lead by reaffirming the central truths of existing traditions, they aim to radicalize these truths from within the community through a process of exemplary behaviour, they ritualize the truths into codes of laws and sacred rituals, and, finally, they open new ways for followers to respond to the original call to lead in systems of responsiveness. The following is a brief description of the existence of the comparative values of service as leadership in four religious traditions through the lens of Weber's descriptions of these leaders and prophets, and McClymond's four themes of religious leadership (discussed in chronological order with regard to the origins of the religious founders of each tradition): Judaism, Buddhism, Christianity and Islam.

Service and leadership in Judaism

Traditional Jewish approaches to leadership, deeply influenced by Judaism's own religious texts and traditions, have been marked by

systems of communal leadership that are concerned with the correct use of power and, thus, have 'sought to divide power, rather than allow it to coalesce in a single individual or group' (Lewis, 2007: p. 246). Moses, considered to be the quintessential Jewish leader (Bloom, 2002), is noted as a servant-leader with an 'unswerving commitment to empowering the leadership of others for the long-term good of the people' (Lewis, 2007: p. 250). The concept of service as leadership in Judaism is most clearly embodied by this Biblical, paradigmatic figure of Moses, who leads as a shepherd (Ehrlich, 2001) and prophet intent on liberating his followers from a life of slavery. It is this image of leader as shepherd that is arguably the most endearing image of servant leadership in the Hebrew Scriptures, and an image that will be utilized in the descriptions of the Divine as leader (Psalm 23) and the nature of the leadership of Judaism's most famous king, David (1 Kings 2).

The Biblical Moses is a leader marked by great humility (Numbers 12: 3) who reaffirmed the core truth of Judaism once lost; the 'understanding of a transcendent God that infuses the individual with a sense of overall meaning, integrity and wholeness' (Kriger and Seng, 2005: p. 790). The core message of oneness radicalized in spectacular accounts of experiences with the Divine as mentioned in the Torah is finally codified and ritualized by Moses in the *sh'mah* (Deuteronomy 6:4, NIV): '*Hear, O Israel: The LORD our God, the LORD is one*' – a core statement of belief that had to be recited twice each day and which formed the basis of religious pedagogy for generations to come. It is this original vision of the unity, oneness, wholeness of the Divine that served to facilitate the formation of a connected vision with others in the followers of Moses. The belief of connectedness was further ritualized in the use of the Semitic construct of covenant in the *Torah*. Pava (2003: p. 2), in describing the kind of 'covenantal leadership' seen in the figure of Moses and the *Torah*, proposes 'five paths' of leading that are infused with meaning and service:

- the path of humanity – leading in humane ways
- the path of no illusions – leading marked by the centrality of pragmatism
- the path of moral imagination – leading that focuses on human value
- the path of the role model – leading characterized by a radical mutuality between leader and follower
- the path of moral growth – leading that facilitates the moral formation of followers.

Pava's Jewish-inspired, 'covenantal leadership' connects in deep ways with the vision of Greenleaf of leader as servant. Moses, seen as the elect of God in the *Torah* (Numbers 11: 24–9), completes this tenure as leader with the insistence 'that no leader can create a cult of personality and hope to succeed in the long term' (Lewis, 2007: p. 250). Moses does not enter the Promised Land with his people; he proclaims that a new leader is needed (Numbers 27: 15–17) and fully embraces the leadership of one of his followers, Joshua (Numbers 27: 22–23). Through this action of responsiveness, Moses declares that the work of a leader is to serve by identifying and nurturing the next generation of leaders. The concept of service as leadership is primary in the images and metaphors of Judaism, and proclaimed and lived in its most exemplary prophet, Moses.

Service and leadership in Buddhism

One of the core truths of Buddhism is the concept that the personal self or 'I' is a false construct of delusional thinking and, ultimately, devoid of reality (Kriger and Seng, 2005). This foundational belief stands in stark contrast to the foundational tenets of self-actualization in Western psychology, on which most theories and principles of Western understanding of leadership have been built (Yukl, 2002). A Buddhist understanding of leadership, infused with the notion of selflessness, or 'no self' (*anatta*), promotes a view of interconnectedness with everyone and everything in the world that is characterized by the 'four immeasurable states of mind' (*Brahmaviharas*): love, compassion, joy and equanimity (Kriger and Seng, 2005: p. 785). The Buddha describes the characteristics of this kind of 'no self' leadership in the *Vimalakirti Sutra*, in a striking description of a *bodhisattva* (an individual who chooses to forego final enlightenment out of compassion for others): 'During the short eons of the swords, they meditate on love, introducing to non-violence. In the middle of great battles, they remain impartial to both sides, for *bodhisattvas* of great strength. In order to help all living beings, they voluntarily descent into the hells (negative states) which are attached.' It is in this pursuit of 'no self' that Buddhist leadership, celebrating the principles of interconnectedness and interdependence (Quatro, 2004), seeks to serve all of mankind in mindful and alert states of leading that Buddhists refers to as 'right livelihood' (Bodhipaksa, 2001).

The Buddha as an awakened leader (Buddha is translated literally as the *Awakened One*), in his efforts to eliminate suffering (*dukkha*), reaffirmed the 'key cosmological conceptions of Hinduism' (McClymond, 2001: p. 628); in particular, the first three noble truths: that life means suffering, that the origin of suffering is attachment, and that the cessation of

suffering was attainable. Siddhartha Gautama would go on as the Buddha to add a fourth noble truth, expounded in an eightfold path that provided a practical guideline for followers to end suffering in their lives. The eightfold path – as a way to wisdom, mental development and ethical conduct – centres on eight areas of right living: right view, right intention, right speech, right action, right livelihood, right effort, right mindfulness, and right concentration (Cohen, 2001). The Buddha radicalized the key truths of Hinduism by proposing that devotees could progress to ultimate salvation (*moksha*) through a ‘single lifetime of disciplined effort’ (McClymond, 2001: p. 637). What is most radical about this idea is that this spiritual progress was made without the observance of caste systems or ritualized sacrifices, as within normative Hinduism. An interesting note on this radicalization was the willingness of the Buddha, as leader, to defer his entrance to nirvana in order to serve others by showing the way. This compassionate action of the Buddha is the nexus point between Buddhist approaches in leadership and Greenleaf’s servant leadership. Most of the ritualized aspects of Buddhism were probably developed long after the time of the Buddha, but the verbal recitation of the threefold refuge: ‘I take refuge in the Buddha, in the dharma (teaching), and the sangha (community)’, might very well have served as the ritualized result of the leadership of the Buddha (McClymond, 2001: p. 645). It is important to note that the recitation of the threefold refuge itself contains a kind of mnemonic map of right belief to ethical action, from teaching to community (Cohen, 2001). The Buddha’s choices, as servant-leader, though deferring his entry to nirvana, created an ethos in which his followers could not only follow the *dharma* (teachings), but also, under Buddha’s compassionate servant leadership, help others find the way. The Buddha as servant-leader fits the model of Weber’s (1968) exemplary prophet who shows the way to a more ethical domain of being and doing.

Service and leadership in Christianity

Recent scholarly models and descriptions of Christian leadership are characterized by descriptions of:

- mimetic imitation of the Divine (Ayers, 2006; Bekker, 2006)
- concern for correct use of power (Engstrom, 1976; Kretschmar, 2002)
- follower-centred approaches (Clarke, 1998; Whittington *et al.*, 2005)
- an overt Christological focus (Clarke, 1992; Niewold, 2007).

Bekker and Winston (2009), in an attempt to define a ‘proto-theory’ of Christian leadership, turned to the ‘proto-text’ of the New Testament

(considered possibly to be the earliest text of Christianity), the Christ-hymn in the letter of Paul to the Christian communities in ancient Roman Philippi. Bekker and Winston's work proposed an early mimetic Christological model of Christian leadership in Roman Philippi by exploring the judicial, rhetorical structure, and the social function of the Philippians hymn (2: 5–11) as a *cursus pudorum* (course of ignominies), which stands in stark contrast to a *cursus honorum*, the formalized sequence of public offices in first-century Roman cities. The Philippians hymn challenged the notions and principles of the prevalent shame/honour social matrix of Roman societies by offering an alternative set of behaviours and values that stood in stark contrast to those of the dominant culture. The hymn made use of a *cursus pudorum* in which the voluntary abasement, service, humility, and obedience of Christ becomes an exemplum that offers a critique of the tyrannies of the timocratic leadership style of Roman Philippi and offers an alternative vision of service-oriented leadership rooted in radical humility and common mutuality.

Jesus of Nazareth, often described as the model servant-leader (Delbecq, 1999; Hutchison, 2009), described the nature of his leadership as one that came to reaffirm the basic tenets of ancient Judaism (Matthew 5: 17–19). He defined His leadership as one of service (Matthew 20: 28, NIV): 'the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many'. Jesus radicalized this notion of leading as service with the ultimate act of self-sacrifice in what the Philippians hymn refers to as being 'obedient to death – even death on a cross' (2: 8, NIV). The ritualization of Jesus' radical message of service and self-sacrifice in leading takes the form of a ritualized dinner in which companions (literally, those who break bread together) re-enact the death of Jesus (1 Corinthians, 11). Not only does the Philippians hymn invite followers to imitate this example of extreme servant leadership; 'your attitude should be the same as that of Christ Jesus' (2: 5, NIV), but the Gospels record that Jesus defined leadership for His followers in a system of responsiveness in terms of service: 'whoever wants to become great among you must be your servant' (Matthew 20: 26, NIV). The servant leadership of Jesus of Nazareth, culminating in his atoning and self-sacrificial death, has been the central focus for Christian scholars and practitioners in the ongoing quest to find an effective and moral model for leadership (Taylor, 2004).

Service and leadership in Islam

Islamic leadership, as exemplified by the prophet Muhammad and his immediate successors, is characterized by a sense of lived spirituality and

the avoidance of personal ambition (Kriger and Seng, 2005). According to Islamic tradition, the leadership of Muhammad is seen to belong to 'a long line of prophets familiar to Jews, Christians, and Muslims' (Campbell, 2008: p. 432). The leadership of Muhammad, as a prophet of Allah, is described in the Qur'an as being of a moral nature: 'and you stand an exalted standard of character' (68: 4). The moral base of Islamic leadership is rooted in the Qur'anic command to serve Allah: 'and We made them leaders guiding (men) by Our command and We sent them inspiration to do good deeds, to establish regular prayers and to practice regular charity; and they constantly served Us' (21: 73). When a leader serves Allah, service to followers becomes possible. According to Islamic tradition, Islamic leaders willing to serve Allah develop a moral character as they progress through four stages of spiritual development:

- faith in Allah (*iman*)
- the achievement of peace with Allah (*islam*)
- developing a sense of awe of Allah (*taqwa*)
- a love for Allah (*ihsan*).

The last stage, the love of Allah (*ihsan*), is what motivates leaders to lead in moral and ethical ways (Qur'an 19: 90). Service as leadership is central to early Islamic models of leadership (Kriger and Seng, 2005), and has been described as present in pre-Islamic approaches of leadership in Bedouin-Arab cultures (Sarayrah, 2004). Contemporary Islamic leadership scholars continue to build on these early foundations and philosophies of servant leadership in a quest to 'eradicate all problems in our social life' (Ather and Sobhani, 2007: p. 7).

Muhammad, as a religious founder, never proposed that he was establishing something new: in his mind he was reaffirming older truths and 'was simply restoring the religion of Adam, Abraham, Moses and Jesus' (Peterson, 2001: p. 677). Yet, Muhammad radicalized the message by recasting the Judeo-Christian accounts of the past to reflect the final mission of Allah in him as His prophet. For Muhammad, service to Allah was linked to fidelity to the message of His prophet; this fidelity would lead to service and leadership to others. Muhammad structured this message in 'rituals that he inherited and repristinated at the Ka'ba' (Peterson, 2001: p. 678) in Mecca, and made the ritual and place central to the religion of Islam. The centrality of both place (Mecca) and text (Qur'an) in Islam was Muhammad's enduring strategy to afford the followers of Allah access, through examples based in responsiveness, to the same spiritual forces that shaped him as a servant-leader.