



The Future of Religious Leadership  
World Religions Share their Wisdom  
Study Unit 3: Christianity

*Where Is Wisdom Found*

Not to be distributed or reproduced without  
permission of the  
Elijah Interfaith Institute



**Text 1**

But Jesus called [the twelve disciples] to him and said, “You know that the rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and their great ones are tyrants over them. It will not be so among you; but whoever wishes to be great among you must be your servant, and whoever wishes to be first among you must be your slave; just as the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life a ransom for many.” (Matt 20:25-28)

**Text 2**

A) From Him [God] and to Him and through Him are all things. (Rom 11:36).

B) My teaching is not my own, but of the one who sent me. (John 7:14).

C) God who is at work in you, both to will and to work for his good pleasure. (Phil 2:12b-13).

D) It is no longer I who live, but it is Christ who lives in me. (Gal 2:20)

**Text 3**

‘... not with plausible words of wisdom, but with a demonstration of the Spirit and of power, so that your faith might rest not on human wisdom but on the power of God’ (Apostle Paul in 1 Cor 2:4).

**Text 4**

‘..so then, beg God, let me know that when I rise to take on the presider’s task, I do it from my place in the assembly.’

Liturgical theologian and Lutheran pastor, Gordon Lathrop, *The Pastor*, p. 20

**Theme 2: The Call to Leadership**

**Text 1**

Submit to one another out of reverence for Christ. (Eph 5:21)

**Text 2**

**Question for consideration:** Is the concept of a ‘servant-leader’ an oxymoron? Is it realistic to ask Christian leaders to emulate this model? What role does God play in the formation of the ‘servant-leader,’ according to Christian theologies?

**Questions for consideration:**

- Identify the characteristics of the ‘ideal leader’ in these texts.
- In what ways is the Christian concept of the ‘ideal leader’ particularly Christian and in what ways is it shared by all religions?

("As [Jesus] went ashore, he saw a great crowd; and he had compassion for them, because they were like sheep without a shepherd; and he began to teach them many things." (Mark 6:34 )

### **Text 3**

The definitive aim [...] is to put people not only in touch but in communion, in intimacy, with Jesus Christ: only He can lead us to the love of the Father in the Spirit and make us share in the life of the Holy Trinity.

Pope John Paul II, "Apostolic Exhortation (Catechesi Tradendae) On Catechesis in Our Time" I.5.11 (16 October 1979).

### **Text 4**

Come to [Jesus Christ], a living stone, though rejected by mortals, yet chosen and precious in God's sight, and like living stones, let yourselves be built into a spiritual house, to be a holy priesthood, to offer spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ. For it stands in scripture: "See, I am laying in Zion a stone, a cornerstone chosen and precious; and whoever believes in him will not be put to shame."

To you then who believe, he is precious; but for those who do not believe, "The stone that the builders rejected has become the very head of the corner" [...] But you are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God's own people, in order that you may proclaim the mighty acts of him who called you out of darkness into his marvelous light.

Once you were not a people, but now you are God's people; once you had not received mercy, but now you have received mercy. [...] Now as an elder myself and a witness of the sufferings of Christ, as well as one who shares in the glory to be revealed, I exhort the elders among you to tend the flock of God that is in your charge, exercising the oversight, not under compulsion but willingly, as God would have you do it - not for sordid gain but eagerly. Do not lord it over those in your charge, but be examples to the flock. And when the chief shepherd appears, you will win the crown of glory that never fades away. In the same way, you who are younger must accept the authority of the elders. And all of you must clothe yourselves with humility in your dealings with one another, for "God opposes the proud, but gives grace to the humble."

(cont over)

Humble yourselves therefore under the mighty hand of God, so that he may exalt you in due time. (1 Peter 2:4-7, 9-10, 5:1-6)

## **Theme 3: Types of Leadership**

### **Text 1: *Fellow Servant***

**Augustine of Hippo (354-430):** Excerpts from Sermon 340: On the Anniversary of His Ordination<sup>1</sup> (Date Uncertain) in *The Works of Saint Augustine: A Translation*

**Question for consideration:** How are Christian leaders expected to imitate or replicate the role that Jesus played?

for the 21st Century' III.9 – Sermons on the Saints, trans. Edmund Hill, ed. John E. Rotelle (Brooklyn, NY: New City Press, 1994) pp. 292-293.

From the moment this burden, about which such a difficult account has to be rendered, was placed on my shoulders, anxiety about the honor shown me has always indeed been haunting me. [...] This burden of mine, you see, about which I am now speaking, what else is it, after all, but you? Pray for strength for me, just as I pray that you may not be too heavy. I mean, the Lord Jesus wouldn't have called his burden light, (See Mt 11:30.) [The later edition leaves out the word "light." ] if he wasn't going to carry it together with its porter. But you too must all support me, so that according to the apostle's instructions we may carry one another's burdens, and in this way fulfill the law of Christ (Gal 6:2). If he doesn't carry it with us, we collapse; if he doesn't carry us, we keel over and die. A not very striking contrast is being made: nobiscum si non portat, succumbimus; si nos non portat, occumbimus. Where I'm terrified by what I am for you, I am given comfort by what I am with you. For you I am a bishop, with you, after all, I am a Christian. The first is the name of an office undertaken, the second a name of grace; that one means danger, this one salvation. A text quoted in Vatican II's document on the Church, Lumen Gentium, 32; in the chapter on the laity, curiously enough, not in that on the hierarchy and the bishops, where one would have thought it belongs. Finally, as if in the open sea, I am being tossed about by the stormy activity involved in that one; but as I recall by whose blood I have been redeemed, I enter a safe harbor in the tranquil recollection of this one; and thus while toiling away at my own proper office, I take my rest in the marvelous benefit conferred on all of us in common.

**Question for consideration:**

Four types of Christian leaders are identified in these headings. Are there other leadership qualities that you can identify in the readings?



St Augustine, Botticelli 1480

So I hope the fact that I have been bought together with you gives me more pleasure than my having been placed at your head; then, as the Lord has commanded, I will be more effectively your servant, and be preserved from ingratitude for the price by which I was bought to be, not too unworthily, your fellow servant. [...]

**Text 2: Teacher and Mentor**

**Saint Seraphim of Sarov** (1759-1833) in Valentine Zander, 'St Seraphim of Sarov' (Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1975) p. x.

Once Father Seraphim had opened his door visitors were never lacking, and it was

not only young monks and novices who sought his counsel but superiors from neighboring monasteries as well. The Father urged these latter to be kind and love their brethren, to have “the love of a mother for her children,” to bear patiently with their weaknesses and even with their diverse failings. He told them that this was what it cost to gain true inner peace. “Learn to be peaceful,” he would say, “and thousands of souls around you will find salvation.”

### ***Text 3: Messenger of God***

**Harriet Tubman (c.1822-1913)** by Quaker Abolitionist Thomas Garrett in ‘Scenes in the Life of Harriet Tubman’ (Auburn, NY: W.J. Moses, 1869) p. 39.

In truth I never met with any person, of any color, who had more confidence in the voice of God, as spoken direct to her soul. She has frequently told me that she talked with God, and he talked with her every day of her life, and she has declared to me that she felt no more fear of being arrested by her former master, or any other person, when in his immediate neighborhood, than she did in the State of New York, or Canada, for she said she [only] ventured [...] where God sent her, and her faith in a Supreme Power truly was great.

### **Theme 4: Perennial and Contemporary Challenges**

#### ***Text 1: Doubt and Fear***

**Martin Luther King, Jr. (1929-1968)** in Donald T. Phillips, ‘On Leadership: Inspiration and Wisdom for Challenging Times’ (NY: Warner Books, 1998), 301.

During the Montgomery [bus boycott] movement [...] after being awakened in the night by a threatening phone call, Martin brewed a pot of coffee and sat down at his kitchen table. He was alone, worried, and fearful for himself and his family. “Oh, Lord,” he prayed, “I’m down here trying to do what is right. But ... I’m afraid. The people are looking to me for leadership, and if I stand before them without strength and courage, they too will falter.” Then he leaned on the table with his head in his hands and, as Martin himself related it, he heard an inner voice: “Martin Luther, stand up for righteousness. Stand up for justice. Stand up for truth. And, lo, I will be with you, even unto the end of the world.” Afterward, Martin said to himself: “I can stand up without fear. I can face anything.”

#### **Text 2: Efficiency versus Compassion**

**Monseñor Oscar Romero, Archbishop of San Salvador (1917-1980)**  
in María López Vigil, Oscar Romero: Memories in Mosaic, trans. Kathy Ogle  
(Washington, D.C.: EPICA, 2000), 148-149

Since I was in charge of bringing some kind of order to the files, as well as to the incoming and outgoing correspondence, some of the other workers in the offices approached me [...]: “Suggest to him that he should have a more fixed schedule for meetings and visits. If he doesn’t, this place is going to be a zoo.” [...]

I put together a few suggestions and went to see him [...] “Some people say that often you don’t follow through on meetings that have already been set - whether they’re with the bishops, or priests or organizations - and that this is happening because you don’t have a good schedule of appointments with specific days and hours ...” I was embarrassed to be explaining this to him. “Go on. Go on.”

“They also say that other unforeseen visits come up, and that they break up the sense of order, and that having order is very important. So, of course, if your day was scheduled better, you could attend to everyone better ...”

He looked pensive. And started to slide the cross that he wore around his neck up and down on its chain ... That was a habit of his when he’d be looking straight at you.

“Well, I don’t think that kind of scheduling is going to be possible.”

“No?”

“No, because I have my priorities. And with or without scheduling, I’m always going to receive any campesino (farmworker, peasant) that shows up here at any time of day, whether I’m in a meeting or not ...”

“So ...” “So, the answer is no ... Look, my fellow bishops all have cars. The parish priests can take buses, and they can afford to wait. But what about the campesinos? They come walking for miles, face all kinds of dangers, and sometimes they haven’t even eaten [...] You know, the campesinos never ask me for anything. They just talk to me about the things that are going on in their lives, and that alone seems to help them. Can I schedule in the times when they’re allowed to do that? I think we should just forget about this.”

I went outside and threw my plans in the first wastebasket I could find.

### **Text 3: Self-Effacement versus Visibility**

Henri Nouwen (1932-1996):

Excerpts from ‘In the Name of Jesus:  
Reflections on Christian Leadership’  
(London: Darton, Longman and Todd, 1989)  
pp. 17, 22, 24-25, 28, 29

The Christian leader of the future is called to be completely irrelevant and to stand in

**Question for consideration:** What qualities of the ‘ideal leader’ from theme one are exemplified in these texts?

this world with nothing to offer but his or her own vulnerable self. That is the way Jesus came to reveal God's love. The great message that we have to carry, as ministers of God's word and followers of Jesus, is that God loves us not because of what we do or accomplish, but because God has created and redeemed us in love and has chosen us to proclaim that love as the true source of all human life. [...] Feeling irrelevant is a much more general experience than we might think when we look at our seemingly self-confident society [...] The leader of the future will be the one who dares to claim his irrelevance in the contemporary world as a divine vocation that allows him or her to enter into a deep solidarity with the anguish underlying all the glitter of success and to bring the light of Jesus there. [...]

### Questions for consideration

Is there a contradiction between the idea of 'leader' and one who is completely 'irrelevant'? How is this resolved for Christian leaders?

What is the role of 'love' in Christian leadership? Does this apply in other religions?

The question is not: How many people take you seriously? How much are you going to accomplish? Can you should some results? But: Are you in love with Jesus? [...] Do you know the incarnate God? In our world of loneliness and despair, there is an enormous need for men and women who know the heart of God, a heart that forgives, that cares, that reaches out and wants to heal [...25] The Christian leader of the future is the one who truly know the heart of God as it has become flesh, "a heart of flesh," in Jesus. [...]

If there is any focus that the Christian leader of the future will need, it is the discipline of dwelling in the presence of the One who keeps asking us, "Do you love me? Do you love me? Do you love me?" It is the discipline of contemplative prayer. [...]

It is not enough for the priests and ministers of the future to be moral people, well trained, eager to help their fellow humans, and able to respond creatively to the burning issues of their time. All of that is very valuable and important, but it is not the heart of Christian leadership. The central question is, 'Are the leaders of the future truly men and women of God, people with an ardent desire to dwell in God's presence, to listen to God's voice, to look at God's beauty, to touch God's incarnate Word and to taste full God's infinite goodness?'

## PART II

### ON CHRISTIAN LEADERSHIP

Miroslav Volf and Awet Andemicael

Some are famous and others obscure; they come from across boundaries of ethnicity, nation, denomination and time and have walked the hard and joyful path of authentic Christian leadership. For true Christian leaders, God is the foundation, provision, and purpose of their lives and their work. Their pattern and referent is Jesus Christ, the great confounder of expectations who presents in His teachings and example a model of Christian leadership that both relates to and subverts conventional conceptions of leadership.

In the West today, the understanding of Christian leadership and practice has increasingly come under the influence of various managerial models. While such models have improved administrative efficiency, the cost has too often been the loss of the very substance of specifically Christian leadership. Urgently needed is a retrieval of that substance, a reclaiming of the theological and spiritual dimensions of Christian leadership.

#### **Forms of Leadership**

The most obvious form of Christian leadership is that of a clerical leader. Early on, clerical leadership was organized into a tripartite division of bishop, presbyter/priest, and deacon. The central and church constitutive role was accorded to the bishop, who both incorporated in his own person the whole congregation and acts in the person of Christ toward the congregation. As the church grew and divided into Orthodox, Catholic and Protestant branches, each section and subsection developed a slightly different form of organizing clerical authority and power, though for the most part all such forms remained basically variations on the early tripartite division.

Nevertheless, it is important to note that Christian leadership is not limited to ordained clergy. Even in churches in which ordained ministry is considered indispensable for the very being of the church, lay leaders often play an important role. Moreover, para-church organizations, missions, and lay Christian organizations provide opportunities for Christian leadership outside official church structures. Within homes, which some consider to be the most basic 'church', parents play critical Christian leadership roles in the lives of their children.

A generic term frequently used for a Christian leader is 'minister', from the Latin for 'servant' or 'waiter'. Christian ministry takes many forms. The long lists of ministries found in the Christian Bible – including such forms of service as prophecy, teaching, preaching/exhortation, healing and giving – are not exhaustive. Indeed, the Christian Bible was written with the assumption that all Christians are called to some form of ministry, a concept that later became known in some Christian traditions as the

‘priesthood of all believers’. The role of ordained ministers (‘special priesthood’) in regard to all other ministers, non-ordained ministers (‘general priesthood’) is not so much to rule over, let alone to oppress, the people, but to empower them: ‘to equip the saints’ for their own ‘work of ministry’ (Eph 4:12).

On one level, Christian leadership is leadership like any other, deeply relational, consisting of an arrangement of power and authority between subject and direct object, leader and followers, pursuing particular goals. These elements – leader, followers, and goal – may be implied rather than stated but they must always be present for leadership to take place. But what is ‘Christian’ about Christian leadership? More than merely leadership by or of Christians is required. A definition that indicated only that much might be appropriate taxonomically, but it would say little about the character and content of Christian leadership itself. Similarly, leadership that takes place within a context, whether cultural, geographic, or chronological, which can be characterized as ‘Christian’ might reflect little of the character of Christianity. Such formal definitions of Christian leadership will therefore not suffice. What we need is a theological ontology of Christian leadership.

### **God at the Centre**

The matter is very simple: for leadership to be authentically Christian, it must grow out of the heart of the Christian faith. One very common and completely accurate way is to say that it is about the reconciliation of people with God through Christ and their transformation by the Holy Spirit for the good of the world. A different way of expressing the same idea is based on the spare and beautiful doxology from the Apostle Paul’s Letter to the Romans. At the most important point of the letter, he wrote: ‘From him [God] and to him and through him are all things’ (Rom 11:36).

This brief doxological formula offers a succinct framework for the Christian account of reality, and thus serves well as a basis for constructing a theological ontology of Christian leadership: ‘from God’. Christian leaders are ‘from God.’ They are not self-appointed or appointed merely by other human beings but are constituted by God’s call. Expressed in ontological terms, God calls them from nonbeing into being. Such a call comes to individuals, but in most Christian traditions it is ‘communicated’, ‘ratified’, or ‘recognized’ by the church, usually through some form of ordination. Ordination is not simply a conference of social power upon the leader; it has to be matched by the leader’s inner call by God.

Each leader must ascend the mount of God – an ascent which is most often metaphorical, though no less genuine than the spiritually-charged physical ascents of great biblical leaders like Moses or the three disciples accompanying the soon-to-be transfigured Christ. It may happen through prayer and meditation, scriptural study, fellowship with other believers, dreams and visions; the possibilities provided by the infinitely resourceful God are countless. Sometimes the call of God comes in grand style; sometimes it is a ‘still, small voice’, discerned within the community of believers in terms of the talents, skills and deep inclinations of each individual.

For leadership to be authentically Christian, it must grow out of the heart of the

Christian faith. Just as they derive being from God, Christian leaders derive their authority from God. Consider the *Great Commission*, which has been and continues to be a foundational text for Christian leadership: in it, Christ, about to be ascended, charges his disciples to continue his mission. According to Matthew's Gospel, Christ's command, 'Go, therefore, and make disciples of all nations' (Mat 28:19-20), is preceded by Christ's claim: 'All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me' (Mat 28:18). Christ's own authority is given to the disciples—to Christian leaders—to bear the gospel message into the world. As God's call creates leadership, God's authority entrusted to Christ empowers it.

In the Christian Bible, specific ministries that various Christians exercise are called charisms or 'gifts.' Leadership is not based on merit, as Paul suggested when he asked rhetorically, 'who has given a gift to [God], to receive a gift in return?' (Rom 11:35). Rather, each person is given a gift from God for ministry, 'according to the grace given to us' (Romans 12:6). In a significant way, at the heart of Christian leadership lies the thought that, as a leader, each person is gifted for the gifting of others: 'for building up the body of Christ' (Eph 4:12b), 'for the common good' (1 Cor 12:7b).

God's call, conferral of authority and gifts are not one-time events. When it comes to authentic Christian leadership, God does not just give it an 'initial push,' so to speak: God keeps it in motion as well. God is a dynamic source, continuously and organically breathing life into leaders in their activity of leading. One way to think about this more abiding presence of God in the leader is by speaking of the transparency of leaders to God – a different usage of the term than in many discussions on leadership. Pope Benedict XVI has used the term in its theological sense in various writings. Paradigmatic for him is the statement of Jesus in John's Gospel: 'My teaching is not my own, but of the one who sent me' (John 7:14).

According to this model, the more leaders take themselves out of the way and the more transparent they become for God, the better leaders they become. Jesus has nothing of His own to give; everything He gives, indeed, His whole person, is from God. The model here is the relationship between God and the divine Word incarnate in Jesus Christ. But even though Jesus Christ is their model, Christian leaders are not Jesus Christ, and the relationship between God and the divine Word, even the Word incarnate, is different from the relationship between God and human beings.

To preserve the integrity of the creature in relation to God, it may be better to speak of translucency of leaders to God rather than transparency. Transparent things are themselves invisible. Their own individuality is overlooked, since their entire purpose lies in their ability to reveal the thing to which they are transparent. Applied to leaders, any marks of individual identity or autonomy hamper their ability to reveal the primary Other, like smudges on a pane of glass. This extent of 'transparency' would denigrate the created integrity of the leader's being and will. But God creates human beings not as generic tools but as individuals; not so that all traces of who they are would be erased into invisibility, but to be in a state of revealing the transcendent God in their created finitude. This is what the idea of translucency seeks to express. When one looks at objects through translucent things, that through which

one looks never disappears but is always seen with the object that is being revealed. Christian leadership is thus both deeply human and deeply divine: the creature's own created value, integrity, and autonomy are affirmed and acknowledged as 'visible,' even as she 'images God' by becoming a 'place' where God becomes manifest.

Translucency is a metaphor for the human 'working out' of God's call 'in fear and trembling,' while at the same time acknowledging that it is 'God who is at work in you, both to will and to work for his good pleasure' (Phil 2:12b-13).

Christian leaders are icons of Christ, translucent to His presence.

Christian leaders are neither primarily experts on the content of Christianity nor wise decision-makers. Rather, Christian leaders are icons of Christ, translucent to His presence. Expressed with a different metaphor, in whatever they do they draw on that well, so that, from them 'streams of living waters flow' (John 7:38b). What matters is that leadership draws from the divine well of the Triune God as revealed in Christ. When leaders in their lives and leading are translucent to God, those lives and actions are themselves witnesses to God. The goal of

leading people to God is inscribed in the very being of Christian leaders. In one sermon, St. Augustine of Hippo, one of the greatest Christian leaders, recalled the story of the apostles leading the foal to Jesus (Mat 21:1-11), so that the foal could bear Christ into Jerusalem. Just so, Augustine exclaimed, do Christian leaders lead people to Christ; so that they may, in turn, bear Christ into the world. Whatever shape it takes, be it preaching, teaching, prophecy, serving, giving, or administration, Christian leadership always leads to Christ so that people can bring Christ to the world.

### **Character of Leadership**

As the self-revelation of God and mediator between God and humanity, Christ is the critical focal point of Christian leadership. Christ provides both the pattern and referent for Christian leaders. Christ's manner of leading was counter-cultural in the Graeco-Roman-dominated culture in which he lived. Cultural dominance and military strength expressed in stable hierarchical relations were the abiding norms of the day. In contrast, Christ modeled what is known by the now nearly worn-out but still accurate phrase 'servant leadership,' and led others into servanthood. The servanthood into which Christ calls leaders is not one of humiliation, but a willing transformation into a posture of joyful humility in the presence of God for the good of others. Instead of 'lording over' their followers, authentic Christian leaders heed the words of Jesus: 'Whoever wishes to be great among you must be your servant, and whoever wishes to be first among you must be your slave' (Matt 20:26).

Given that their leadership is from God and through God, Christian leaders are responsible ultimately to God, and not to people they serve. The servanthood into which Christ calls leaders is a willing transformation into a posture of joyful humility in the presence of God for the good of others. In concrete situations, there is a tension between responsibility to God and service to concrete communities, and it takes

wisdom to know how to be a servant to a community in obedience to God.

Almost universally, leaders are seen fundamentally as part of the community. In the act of leading, they stand on the side of God and over against the community. But even more fundamentally, as human beings and Christians they stand with the community and over against God. There are differences among Christian churches about the relationship between 'standing over against' community and 'being part of the' community and about the implications of being part of the community. On one end of the spectrum are democratic forms of ecclesiastical governance, exemplified paradigmatically by churches with congregationalist polities. On the other end are monarchic forms of governance, where the ultimate authority, again residing in God, is vested primarily in a local bishop, appointed by the assembly of bishops.

Given that their leadership is from God and through God, Christian leaders are responsible ultimately to God, and not to people they serve.

## **Challenges to Christian Leadership**

### **A. 'Malfunctions' of Leadership**

In the difficult work of maintaining the authentic character of Christian leadership, leaders face many challenges. Building on the distinction between two key moments of prophetic religions, the character of Christian leadership can be imagined with the help of the metaphors of 'ascent' (to the mountain of God) and 'return' (to the world with God's transformative message). In concrete experience, the two moments often happen in alternating spaces and times (prayer or study at one time; proclamation, pastoral care, or administration at another). Yet they are inextricably intertwined: the God of the 'ascent' is fully present and active in the 'return', and the Other-oriented action of the 'return' is a natural overflow of the purpose and fulfillment of the 'ascent'. 'Malfunctions' of Christian leadership often take place at the point of either ascent or return.

Leaders who once responded to a genuine call of God, may have lost sight of their calling and their fundamental character as beings translucent to God. When this happens, leaders are deprived of the animating power of God to continually ground and sustain leadership in the life of God. And yet, since they are religious leaders, they often have to act as if they have made the ascent, as if they are bringing the message somehow from God and are in touch with transcendence. Instead of real ascent, there is a pretense of ascent. In some cases, the vacuum resulting from the pretense of ascent is filled by substituting the content of God's revelation with what the Christian Bible calls 'worldly wisdom.' The content of 'worldly wisdom' is incompatible with the truth, goodness and beauty stemming from God. Alien wisdom gets wrapped up in religious packaging and sold as a genuine good. It can be difficult to distinguish a real from a pretended ascent, or the true God from an idol.

## B. Experiential Satisfaction: A New Take on an Old Tendency

In today's world, human flourishing is increasingly understood as 'experiential satisfaction,' and the business of life is organized primarily around the 'pursuit of desire.' On the surface, it may seem that we are talking about simple selfishness, hedonism, or greed – the shrinking of interest to mere concern for the self and what serves the self's experience of satisfaction. Although the pursuit of experiential satisfaction has been a factor in human life throughout its history – the saying 'let us eat, drink, and be merry, for tomorrow we die,' found in the Bible, is just one crass expression of it – the situation is different now. Experiential satisfaction is not just one element which has its proper place in the larger conception of a life well lived. It has become the primary content of a life well lived, or of human flourishing.

This account of human flourishing constitutes a fundamental challenge to all religions and all religious leaders, and undermines the entire religious vision of life, indeed, the humane way of life itself. All religions are about connecting the self both with an 'ultimate reality' larger than the self and with other people.

According to the Christian tradition, love of God and, in God, love of neighbor is more than a prudent rule to follow, more even than a commandment to be obeyed. It is the very purpose and meaning of human life, God's design for the fulfillment of human being. All religions provide ways to organize, direct, and transform human desire so that people can be turned away from empty and meaningless self-oriented pleasure and, by transcending themselves, come to live deeply meaningful lives.

For the Christian tradition, the emphasis on 'satisfaction' is a problem because it threatens to do the very reverse – to draw people away from the fulfillment of loving God and neighbor and distort almost beyond recognition the Christian conception of what it is to be a restored human being in Christ. The single-minded pursuit of experiential satisfaction often leaves a trail of ruined lives. The writer of the Letter to the Ephesians puts things starkly: All of us once lived among them in the passions of our flesh, following the desires of flesh and senses, and we were by nature children of wrath, like everyone else. But God, who is rich in mercy, out of the great love with which he loved us even when we were dead through our trespasses, made us alive together with Christ – by grace you have been saved (Eph 2:3-5).

There is a tension between responsibility to God and service to concrete communities, and it takes wisdom to know how to be a servant to a community in obedience to God.

Within Christian communities, those in positions of influence must consider how Christian leadership can address these concerns. There are two aspects to meeting this challenge. The first response has to do with the spirituality of leaders, their own rootedness in the faith which serves as an alternative to post-modernism. They themselves must in their own person resist the temptation to live as if experiential satisfaction is the meaning of life. To do so, Christian leaders must focus on maintaining their own connection with and translucence to God. They must be conformed to the living Christ – not merely the historical memory of a 'great teacher'

and ‘innocent martyr’ – if they are to exercise sustainable Christian leadership that can point people away from the pursuit of desire toward authentic human living for God and for neighbor. The second response to the challenge that post-modernism represents concerns the function of leaders as thinkers and teachers. Leaders must be trained to be able to (1) understand deeply the world, its problems and possibilities that open themselves up; (2) understand the Christian tradition, above all the biblical traditions and the great visions of life before God expressed by the ‘cloud of witnesses’ of the Christian faith; and (3) articulate and demonstrate in what ways this ancient faith can prove to be life-giving in contemporary situations.

If the ministry of reconciliation lies at the heart of the Christian faith, then helping people receive forgiveness from God and practice forgiveness toward those who have injured them should be one of the primary goals of Christian leaders. Through all this, leaders must seek actively to lead people to counter conceptions of human flourishing which reduce it to experiential satisfaction, and seek instead to retrieve a more salutary perspective on living well. The resources for this are built into the fabric of what it is to be Christian: a refocusing of ideas of human telos back onto God. After all, the Christian understanding of ‘living well’ is that same dual motion of loving God and neighbor, as embodied in Christ. Only in such a love can human being find its true fulfillment: a genuine, God-mediated love even for the despised Other, it reconciles human beings to God, to one another and to themselves, engaging each in the work of serving the global common good. The most pointed example of love of the other in the Christian tradition is forgiveness because it is not just love of neighbor, but is love of the neighbor who has become an enemy. In many ways, forgiveness can be seen as the heart of the Gospel.

### **Conclusion**

Within Christian communities, leaders are needed as the ‘hands and feet’ of God at work in the world today. Christian leadership must be identified on every level with Christ Jesus as the self-revelation of the Triune God, ‘from whom and through whom and to whom,’ according to Christian Scriptures, ‘are all things’ (Rom 11:36). Such Christ-infused leadership takes the particular form of ‘servant-leadership,’ regardless of the specifics of how is it incarnated in individual relationships and contexts.

All challenges may be addressed by the simple though humanly impossible act—made possible by God’s grace—of reorienting the being of leaders and, through them, of followers to the love of God. In that love of God, people are enabled to discover the love of neighbor that seeks the common good as an overflowing of the life of God. Even experiential satisfaction may be transformed in this economy of divine love, so that it may be enjoyed in its proper perspective as a gift of God, given as part of the common good. As Christian leaders in their living and leading grow more and more translucent to God in Christ Jesus – the God who is love – and work boldly to reorient followers to the source and telos of their human being – the God who is love – they will be reconciled to their own purpose. Though the ‘great’ among

us will be the 'servant,' and the 'first' among us will be the 'slave' (Matt 20:26-27), this pattern which Christ Himself has established will be to the fulfillment of God's kingdom for the common good of all humanity.

## PART I SOURCES FOR DISCUSSION

### Theme 1: The Ideal Leader

#### **Questions for Discussion:**

When is any leadership specifically that of a given religion (Jewish, Hindu etc.), and when does it simply involve members of the faith community, without having characteristics that are specific to the religion that would justify labeling it according to the given religion ('Jewish leadership' etc.)?

Is the notion that removal of ego is a condition for spiritually effective leadership to be found in all religions?

Does the iconic understanding of leadership in Christianity go beyond the idea that all leadership follows the model of the founder of the religion (Moses, Muhammad, Buddha etc.)? Can similar expressions be found in other religions?

Does the idea of leading 'to God' find more common ground with other religions, than the notions of 'from God' and 'through God'?

(Questions continued over)

**Questions (cont):**

Is service a universal feature of religious leadership?

How essential is humility to the image of the ideal religious leader?

What role do those who are led play in the success of religious leadership (e.g. assent to be led, intercessory prayer for leaders, access to lay leadership responsibilities, accountability of their leaders to them)? How might their willing participation be obtained?

Consider how authority plays into the role of the leader. Are there types of leadership that rely more heavily on authority than others? Why and when does a religion emphasize authority?

Are the causes of 'malfunction' of leadership the same across traditions? If so, is this a reflection of our common human nature?

'The Future of Religious Leadership' Study Unit created by the Elijah Interfaith Institute, based on papers authored by members of the Elijah Interfaith Academy Think Tank in preparation for the Meeting of World Religious Leaders, Haifa 2009, edited by Peta Jones Pellach

The Essay Collection: "The Future of Religious Leadership" is available at [www.elijah-interfaith.org](http://www.elijah-interfaith.org). Paper presenting Christian perspective by Miroslav Wolf and Awet Andemicael.

Copyright © 2006 The Elijah Interfaith Institute. All rights reserved worldwide.

Elijah Interfaith Institute  
admin@elijah-interfaith.org  
[www.elijah-interfaith.org](http://www.elijah-interfaith.org)

