

“The Future of Religious Leadership”

Text Study

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Elijah takes the view that the wisdom of the traditions can be found in their writings – both in sacred texts and in the works of scholars. So, text-study is a basic skill for sharing wisdom.

Elijah is pleased to offer guided text-study on a number of topics.

The following texts reflect the ideals and challenges of religious leadership.

Although each text is drawn from a different tradition, they all provide guidance for religious leaders of all faiths.

Although some of the texts are from ages past, the messages in them supersede any historic or geographic context.

Judaism:

Moses Maimonides, *Guide of the Perplexed*:

The well-being of society demands that there should be a leader able to regulate the actions of man; he must complete every shortcoming, remove every excess, and prescribe for the conduct of all, so that the natural variety should be counterbalanced by the uniformity of legislation, and the order of society be well established... It being the will of God that our race should exist and be permanently established, He in His wisdom gave it such properties that men can acquire the capacity of ruling others. Some persons are therefore inspired with theories of legislation, such as prophets and lawgivers: others

possess the power of enforcing the dictates of the former, and of compelling people to obey them, and to act accordingly.¹

1. Note the historic context – Maimonides was writing in 12th Century Egypt. In addition to imbuing the heritage of Spanish Jewry, he was steeped in Islamic theology and Greek philosophy. Is any of this evident? Does the historical context make any difference to the relevance of the source?
2. Who was he addressing? For whom is this work intended? Does that make any difference to contemporary readers?
3. According to Maimonides, how does one acquire “leadership”?
4. According to Maimonides, what is the role of the leader?
5. What does Maimonides believe will be the outcome of poor leadership or lack of leadership?
6. What different types of leadership does Maimonides identify? To what roles in contemporary society are they parallel? Are all of those roles “leadership” roles?

Christianity:

Henri Nouwen (1932-1996): Excerpts from *In the Name of Jesus*¹

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

¹ Henri Nouwen, *In the Name of Jesus: Reflections on Christian Leadership* (London: Darton, Longman and Todd, 1989), 17, 22, 24-25, 28, 29.

created and redeemed us in love and has chosen us to proclaim that love as the true source of all human life. [...]

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. [...]

1. Context – the author was a Dutch Catholic priest and professor. Do you believe that his situation in war-torn and post-war Europe is relevant? To what extent do you believe that the Shoah would have impacted on his thought?
2. To whom is this source addressed? Is it relevant to a broader audience?
3. According to Nouwen, how can a Christian leader emulate Jesus?
4. According to Nouwen, what is the ideal form of leadership? Is this type of leadership an ideal in other traditions or is it uniquely Christian?
5. According to Nouwen, what mistakes to leaders make in assessing their role?
6. Nouwen describes the world as in “loneliness and despair.” What role does the leader play in such a world? Is this type of leadership only relevant in such a situation?

Islam

Alī wrote:

...let the dearest of your treasuries be the treasury of righteous action. Control your desires and restrain your soul from what is not lawful to you, for restraint of the soul is for it to be equitable in what it likes and dislikes. Infuse your heart with mercy, love and kindness for your subjects. Be not in face of them a voracious animal, counting them as easy prey, for they are of two kinds: either they are your brothers in religion or your equals in creation...grant them your pardon and your forgiveness to the same extent that you hope God will grant you His pardon and forgiveness. For you are above them, and he who appointed you is above you, and God is above him who appointed you. God has sought from you the fulfillment of their requirements and He is trying you with them...

1. Context – Ali (7th Century successor to Mohammed) made this pronouncement when he appointed his governors in Egypt, where they would be Muslim rulers over a majority Christian population. To what extent is this circumstance reflected in the text?
2. To whom is this addressed? Does it have application beyond the original audience?
3. What does he identify as pitfalls for those in positions of power?
4. What attitude should a leader have to his subjects
5. What should a leader value most in his position of authority?
6. What is the relationship of God to a person in leadership?

Krishna reminds Arjuna in Bhagavadgita 3:21-24:

Whatever a leader does is followed by others; people adopt the standards established by such persons.

There is nothing in the three worlds that has to be done by me or anything unattained that has to be attained; still I engage in action.

If I did not engage in work, tirelessly, people in every respect would follow my example.

These worlds would perish if I did not perform actions. I would be the cause of chaos and destroy these creatures.

1. Context – this is an excerpt from a Sacred Source. Note that a Sacred Source is one that has particular authority in the religious tradition from which it comes. The authorship is (usually) considered Divine or Divinely inspired. The Divine voice is frequently part of sacred sources. What difference does this make to other readers?
2. Who is the intended audience for this source? Are there barriers to a general readership?
3. According to this source, what is the relationship between the leader and his followers?
4. According to this source, what is the main role of the leader?
5. What would be the result of bad leadership?
6. What are the characteristics of a successful leader, according to this source?

Buddhism:

Caotang said:

There is essentially nothing to leadership but to carefully observe people`s conditions and know them all, in both upper and lower echelons.

When people`s inner conditions are thoroughly understood, then inside and outside are in harmony. When above and below communicate, all affairs are set in order. This is how leadership is made secure.

If the leader cannot minutely discern people`s psychological conditions, and the feelings of those below is not communicated above, then above and below oppose each other and matters are disordered. This is how leadership goes to ruin.

1. The author is a 12th Century Chinese Zen Buddhist teacher. Is there anything about the source that indicates its historical and geographic context?
2. To whom is this source addressed? Does it have a message for a wider group?
3. What are the “upper and lower echelons”?
4. According to this source, what are the hallmarks of a good leader?
5. How does a leader measure her or his success?
6. What do you make of the phrase “This is how leadership is made secure.”?

Sikhism

Guru Gobind Singh told the Sikhs:

I have bestowed the Gurushipⁱⁱ on Khalsa.

Khalsa is my very self and I always be present in the mystic body of the Khalsa.

It is due to them that I am holding exalted position.

I was born to serve them.

Through them I have achieved eminence.

What would I have been without their kind and ready help?

There are millions of insignificant fellows like me.²

1. The author lived in the 17th Century and was the last of the 10 Sikh Gurus. The term “Khalsa” refers to the community, which is sovereign. The historical setting is the end of the era of Sikh Gurus and devolvement of authority to the community. This represents significant change in the leadership structure. What is the legacy that Guru Gobind Singh is leaving?
2. Examine the line, “I was born to serve them.” What does this say about leadership?
3. What is the source saying about the relationship between the leader and his followers?
4. Look at the words “exalted position” and “insignificant fellows.” What is the point of making a distinction between the role and person?
5. Does the end of the era of the Gurus represent the achievement of an ideal?
6. Who or what ideally replaces the Gurus?

ⁱ Moses Maimonides, *Guide of the Perplexed*, trans. S. Pines, 2:40 (Chicago, 1969) 382.

ⁱⁱ [From the chapter on Hinduism: The syllable “gu” stands for the darkness of spiritual ignorance; “ru” represents its remover; A *guru* is so called because he removes the darkness of ignorance.]

² Guru Gobind Singh, *Gian Pabodh*, *Swayya*, 645.