



# The Future of Religious Leadership: World Religions in Conversation

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## Abstract

This essay offers a critical reading in *The Future of Religious Leadership: World Religions in Conversation*, a collection of articles edited by Alon Goshen-Gottstein. The essay suggests a few ways of reading this book. In one way, it should be appreciated as a history of ideas, allowing us to trace the development of the concept of leadership in various religions, allowing us to understand how leadership came to be what it is today. The question posed to all the authors who wrote texts for this book pertained not only to the significance of leadership in their respective religions, but to the future of religious leadership. They were asked to address the challenges they have faced, the ways in which they have contended with them, and, equally important, the manner in which they have dealt with the cumulative significance of the many challenges to a new formulation of leadership in the future. Therefore, before readers embark on their encounter with each of the different accounts contained in the book, it is important to start by first considering the significance of the project as a whole. To this end, this review begins by presenting the book's potential readers with its major challenge, which also appears to have been the goal of compiling all of its essays into one text: identification of the shared elements of the challenges facing the different religious leaderships. Phrased more precisely, it is the argument that the future of religious leadership depends entirely on interreligious discourse. It is the divergence into interreligious study and interreligious theology—which the book's authors and editors regard as necessary at this point in time—that constitutes the primary motive for the anthology's compilation into a single major project.

**Keywords** Religious leadership · Jewish philosophy · Islam · Christianity · Buddhism · Sikhism

*The Future of Religious Leadership: World Religions in Conversation*, edited by Alon Goshen-Gottstein (2016), challenges the reader by proposing two processes

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of interpretation and reading, each of which demands considerable attention from the reader. On the one hand, the volume offers a collection of articles devoted to the question of religious leadership within each respective religion. All the authors play an active role in their religions, which they seek to describe in their texts, and the question of leadership is addressed in an individual manner based on their own personal experiences. What emerges is not the neutral description of an interested scholar, but rather the highly involved description of a leader engaging in a reflective self-reckoning from within their own religious work, and paying minimal attention to the sociological and psychological aspects of leadership. For reasons explained in the volume's introduction regarding the circumstances in which this anthology came into being, the work contains a variety of essays written by participants in the religious and interreligious discourse of the Elijah Interfaith Institute following a conference titled "Religious Leadership." Due to the circumstances surrounding the anthology's composition, it is only partially representative of the world's religions, offering the reader a window into the monotheistic religions on the one hand, and the religions of India on the other. Perhaps it can also be described as an encounter between India and the West. In this sense, it is an interesting and intriguing anthology that offers an external and internal look at religious figures and scholars of religion.

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The essay on the Christian question that opens the collection (pp. 23–52) wields great significance upon the editorial design of the book. Of course, its importance impacts first and foremost upon the varied aspects of Christian discourse. However, in the context of the collection of essays that we have before us, it assists us in examining the religious nature of leadership. For whatever the attitude to religious leadership is, it must determine its relationship to the Deity, that is, its relationship to the absolute authority of God. When God is consigned to the role of "the King," in both heaven and earth, all human political and religious authority is severely undermined.

Indeed, it requires great courage to present the Christian attitude towards leadership before an open Jewish society: because of the interfaith dialogue which animates and governs the entire collection and because of the specific objection of Jewish philosophical thought to any comparison between man and God, and between the earthly and heavenly domains. This matter is relevant in the same way, and perhaps even in a more extreme measure, as regards Islam.

Therefore, before readers embark on their encounter with each of the different accounts contained in the book, it is important to start by first considering the significance of the project as a whole. To this end, this review begins by presenting the book's potential readers with its major challenge, which also appears to have been the goal of compiling all of its essays into one text: identification of the shared elements of the challenges facing the different religious leaderships. Phrased more precisely, it is the argument that the future of religious leadership depends entirely

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The project is an ambitious one, as it seeks to reformulate particularistic religious thinking and the thinking of different religions that view themselves as taking part in a large-scale interreligious theological project. We must not downplay the spiritual thesis proposed here, as it lies at the core of the discussion pertaining to the reading of each of the book’s chapters. That is to say, the deep meaning of religious leadership in Islam or Hinduism must first be understood based on the social and spiritual contexts of each religion, and then understood anew in light of the overall meaning of the challenge of religious leadership.

The book in its full scope, therefore, must be understood not simply by reading it from cover to cover, but also by reading it after considering the editor’s view on the project as a whole. Such a reading sheds light on the spiritual religious meaning of the project, which not only offers a scholarly observation, but regards the personal scholarly approach as a means to a far-reaching spiritual step on the part of the religious leadership, *vis-à-vis* the different religious communities and religion’s current status within humanity as a whole.

## **The Kingdom of God, Mysticism, Redemption, and Education**

One of the significant questions that lies at the heart of this book, at times implicitly and at other times explicitly, is what makes the question of religious leadership a religious question as opposed to simply a social or political one. In a sense, all the religions discussed in the book offer an initial image of formative leadership, whether the figure in question is Muhammad or Moses. In each of the religious contexts, we must also consider the divine metaphysical meaning of leadership. In what sense must divine religious meaning be assigned to the local or general leadership? This question can also be formulated in terms taken from the political realm, which consider the source of the leadership’s authority: Is its authority bestowed by God? Or is it rooted in revelation, the nation, existence, or nothingness?

The question of Christianity and the image of Jesus is a critical formative element of the discussion itself. On a profound level, as noted by Awet Iassu Andemicael and Miroslav Volf (authors of Chapter 2, “On Christian Leadership”), the moment at which the issue of being an emissary on behalf of Jesus comes under discussion is the moment at which we must ask ourselves about his human and divine status, and to understand more than simply who the man in question is: son of man, son of God, or God the son? In actuality, the entire structure of the messianic mission is also advanced and placed on trial. It is the moment that the question of leadership is discussed in terms of “from God,” “through God,” or “to God.” Placing God at the center raises spiritual questions of the utmost importance regarding the place and role of leadership and the source of its authority. The authors conclude the volume with a prayer regarding the standing of the servant on behalf of “the kingdom of God” that does a better job than many other

formulations used to express the dilemma and the unique spiritual situation of religious leadership today.

This is perhaps the most important embodiment of the significance of the interreligious reading. For even if the members of other religions are cautious about making reference to their formative religious leadership in messianic or divine terms, the Christian messianic religious perspective facilitates and perhaps even requires a messianic view of all religious leadership. We can also generalize by saying that each of the chapters contributes an understanding of some aspect of religious leadership that is actually held by all religious leadership to some extent. For example, even in religions that do not confer messianic or divine status to their leaders, there is some messianic element in their leadership (in common with Christianity, for example), some drive to reach a transcendent future goal. Perhaps the best example of this claim is the notable instance of Muhammad, whose followers believe has a special, but non-divine status, from which are derived all questions of leadership in Islam up to the present day. The discussion of religious leadership in the Christian context makes it easier to understand the Islamic view as well.

One of the high points of the book before us is its analysis of religious leadership in Islam. Islamic monotheism, which completely denies man any comprehension of God, and requires an intense closeness between the believer and God—Allah—creates the permanent question regarding the “Islamic Caliphate” and mediating religious leadership. The position set out in this essay is a theological one that sees the religious leader as having to relinquish his self-concept and ego in order to be faithful to God’s authority. When I read this description over and over, I identified an intense theological attempt to solve the dilemma of earthly leadership by directly confronting the theological significance of all types of leadership.

In his essay (Chapter 5), Batwant Singh Dhillon analyzes the question of religious leadership in the context of Sikhism in light of its founder Guru Nanak (pp. 103–127). To address the major questions about religion, he adds an instrumentalist observation, meaning, one that emphasizes the leader’s role as an instrument. As I see it, the discussion also addresses the significant mystical spiritual dimension of leadership, that is to say, the unique nature of religious leadership, which is not only an expression of the political and the community-oriented, but also of the mystical (pp. 112–115).

All of the articles make repeated reference to the religious leader’s status as a teacher. The Jewish example is of course a prominent example of this role, stemming from the great importance of learning and study in Judaism, but it is in the Buddhist context that this perspective is paid the most attention (pp. 151–172). Understanding the fact that attention is paid not only to the perspective of the leader as teacher but also to the unique teacher–student dynamic—between the teacher, the student, and ultimately the community—requires an understanding of the important status of knowledge and enlightenment in Buddhism (pp. 157–160). In the Buddhist context, in which the self-understanding of the leadership is based on neither God nor revelation, all meaning of leadership is derived from enlightenment and from the teacher’s ability to guide others to enlightenment. The leader’s role is first and foremost that of a model and a guide.

## A Shared Vision Toward the Future

In most anthologies of essays published around the world, the editor plays the crucial leadership role of guiding the different authors and their texts and outlining for readers the manner in which the essays are to be read together as a single work, from beginning to end. The seventh chapter, which was written by the book's editor, is a chapter of critical importance that takes a meaningful spiritual step forward. And although I cannot be sure, it appears to be no coincidence that the editor left this essay for chapter seven. In Jewish tradition, the number seven is thought to have a sacred status: the seventh day, the Shmita or Sabbatical year, and the mystery of the sevens of the Jubilee Year. In Jewish mystical literature, the number seven is perceived as the "interior" of the count—as that which deals not with the six sides of the cube but with its interior and that which it does or does not contain. In a spiritually focused book like this one, even if not explicitly stated or acknowledged, it is highly significant that the book's seventh chapter constitutes an attempt to assemble the book's different discussions into a single spiritual essay.

Indeed, the texts require a reformulation based on what is common to and distinct about each of the different articles and the unique perspectives of the different religions (pp. 173–188). To this end, the chapter's author enumerates a number of important aspects of the discussion, such as the dimensions of compassion, serving, and humility. But Goshen-Gottstein goes further by raising the issue of sanctity as a fundamental aspect of leadership, which leads us to a difficult and troubling conclusion about the leadership of religions: a conclusion of failure. The questions asked are not simply products of their time, inquiries into the meaning of religious leadership in the present; they are profound queries of spiritual partnership regarding the question of leadership.

In a profound sense, the answer of the editors and the group from which the collection of articles was drawn is the stipulation that true religious leadership can only grow out of the interreligious discourse proposed in this book. The entire question of religious leadership, which we have thus far sought to engage as a question with relevance to specific circles in specific contexts, takes a step forward in this book. From this point on, the religious answer is the interreligious answer. The religious leadership that is engaged in seeking the solution to the challenges of religion and religious leadership in the current period must address the challenges of the current period, which are those that are not dependent on interreligious thought.

When attempting to understand the deep meaning of the interreligious project as it responds to and addresses the challenges of religious leadership, I found myself delving deep into the profound questions that pertain to each religion alone, which are the profound questions of all religions. The greatness of true leadership lies in its ability to understand both its limitations and the context in which it is acting. The greatness of true religious leadership lies in its ability to understand its limitations and to discover the breadth and the context in which it is operating. And at the depths of the actuality of religion, this is found in the general religious experience which can only be reached through interreligious discourse.

In my view as a reader of the discussion from a spiritual perspective, the book's editor is asking us, the readers, to understand the entire question of religious leadership

anew, as an unsolvable spiritual paradox. The very assumption of religious leadership is itself its failure. It itself undermines the spiritual possibility of its being religious leadership. This is no trivial matter—it is a social-spiritual dilemma in which the true leader may be a man who lacks any capacity for political and social leadership. The thinking in Spinoza's *Theological-Political Treatise* regarding the roles of the king, the prophet, and God in the theological-political contract assumes even greater validity here after being discussed in spiritual terms.

The book's surprising conclusion—the leadership's composition of a joint prayer based on the discourse of the different religions—is the only possible solution; in other words, to pose neither the image of the leader nor the image of the teacher, but rather the image of the leader as a praying individual. The basis of the leadership's arrogant position is necessary for its ability to give up its status and to pose its inferiority, that is to say, the fact that he is a praying individual.

We stand before you not merely as individuals but as members of communities and as children of a common humanity.

We recognize that in truth we are no better than those we seek to serve and who have appointed us to our offices.

...

Oh Lord,

May we be instruments of unity, within our individual religions and between our diverse traditions.

May we be inspired by divine wisdom, as we navigate and guide our faiths and our faithful.

May we be beacons of useful, effective and living knowledge, that nourishes the souls of the faithful and guides them in their spiritual lives.

May we be fully transparent to you, recalling at every step that it is not we who are guiding our traditions, but it is you, our Lord.

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