

## Parallel Lives of Spiritual Leaders

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### Abstract

Leadership studies refer to the discipline which seeks to understand how leaders emerge; traits, behaviors, and processes of effective leaders; and the interactions among leaders, followers, and their contexts. Leadership scholars have studied a wide variety of religious leaders through research on well-known figures (e.g. Jesus Christ). For example, *The Journal of Religious Leadership* publishes scholarly articles on leadership practices of specific religions such as the Quakers, Lutherans, Roman Catholics, and many others. Gurus, monks, priests, rabbis, and ulema are all recognized as religious leaders. While religious leaders have received a lot of attention in leadership studies, the role of spiritual leader in mystical traditions is largely ignored. Perhaps the emphasis on spiritual aspirants' direct experience of the divine shadows the role of leaders in these traditions. In this paper, I suggest that spiritual leaders serve as role models and symbols; they provide practical approaches and guidance that empower aspirants in their quests.

Leadership refers to the processes involved in influencing others to achieve common goals (Northouse). It is considered a process because the leadership activities are ongoing. Leaders are expected to influence others in a variety of ways, such as through motivating followers. Many scholars do not consider individuals who gain and maintain followers strictly through force, threat, or manipulation to

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be leaders. For example, many scholars argue that these are tyrants. Rather, leadership involves influencing others towards common goals that benefit both leader and followers or that both view as worthy pursuits.

There are many ways to conceptualize leadership. Although the scientific study of leadership emerged in the past century, scholarly writings and empirical research inform our understanding of relevant traits, behaviors, processes, leadership styles, followership, and situational demands that impact leadership effectiveness and other important outcomes. Leadership studies scholars investigate leadership in a variety of ways, often with the goal of predicting leader emergence and leadership effectiveness. In the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, researchers devoted much attention to leader traits. Based on the assumption that leaders are “born” rather than “made,” a variety of traits emerged as characteristics of leaders. For example, intelligence, self-confidence, and sociability were investigated as traits characteristic of leaders. Research in this area slowed after inconclusive results, although new initiatives in this area are emerging (Zaccaro, Kemp and Bader). The focus of leadership studies shifted to behaviors of effective leaders. Many empirical studies revealed that certain task-oriented (e.g., planning and goal-setting) and relationship-oriented (e.g., inquiring about the well-being of followers) behaviors are necessary for effective leadership. However, these behaviors seemed to differ depending on the situation. This led to another shift in focus of leadership studies towards situational leadership approaches. Scholars have modeled effective leadership actions based on different aspects of the situation and/or the needs of followers.

This is a general overview of leadership studies, and in the sections that follow, I present specific leadership frameworks that may be relevant to many mystical traditions. These frameworks are based on the concepts of leadership and power, leader emergence, leadership styles, leadership and motivation, and the role of followers.

## 1. Leadership and Power

A simple, but very informative ways of examining leadership involves understanding power dynamics. Power gives an individual authority and credibility to influence or to control others. Power is not reserved for leaders; followers, as well as tyrants, persecutors, and others have various levels and sources of power. Power is particularly interesting when it comes to the topic of spiritual leadership. French and Raven suggest that there are five main sources of power: referent power, expert power, legitimate (position) power, reward power, and coercive power. *Referent power* derives from the individual's personality and from other personal characteristics. Integrity, charisma, and other attributes of the individual attract followers, win support, and/or maintain relationships. Certain attributes can make the individual seem more trustworthy, competent, or likeable; followers want to be like this person, as well. *Expert power* derives from an individual's knowledge, skills, or abilities. If an individual has relevant expertise, they appear competent and can attract followers. *Legitimate power* derives from the individual's assigned or elected position. Common examples include the power associated with being a supervisor, parent, police officer, or religious leader — although any organization of individuals could establish positions that grant power. *Reward power* derives from having the authority and/or resources to give incentives. Common examples include a supervisor having the power to promote subordinates, parents giving children privileges, or a guru's ability to perform miracles. *Coercive power* derives from the ability to punish followers or to otherwise force them to do that which they would not willingly do otherwise. Common examples include a police officer's ability to arrest a citizen, a supervisor's willingness to berate a subordinate, or the ability of an individual to tarnish the reputation of another.

Understanding sources of power and power dynamics between leaders and followers is essential to understanding leadership. Above is a simple overview, but each of these sources of power grants certain opportunities and threats to the person in a leadership role. Scholars have linked each with certain *influence processes* and whether

followers will respond with commitment, resistance, or whether they will simply comply (Yukl). It is also possible to see how leaders and followers can switch roles depending on the power sources that are present. For example, followers can shift into leadership roles when they have certain expertise that is relevant for the situation (expert power) or when they are particularly charismatic (referent power) (Baker).

### 1.1 Power Sources of Spiritual Leaders

Considering power sources, one could argue that referent power and expert power are most relevant to spiritual leaders in mystical traditions. Although some mystical traditions recognize formal positions of authority, these positions often reflect the leader's experience with spiritual practices associated with the tradition. To emerge as a leader in traditional religions, typically an individual must complete formal training or inherit the position. For example, Rabbis are thoroughly trained to become authorities of Jewish law. Other leaders of Judaism emerge based on their lineage, such as having ties to a particular tribe. To become a Catholic priest, one must earn an academic degree and attend seminary. Similar criteria exist throughout Christianity, Islam, and other religions. Religious leaders have strong position power, which requires a responsible approach, time, and effort to protect and to maintain the values and traditions of that religion.

### 1.2 Expert Power

Within mystical traditions, the leader's role is often less defined. Individuals who emerge into these roles often do not enter into a physically defined position of power. Spiritual leaders appear to emerge based on the outcomes of personal, spiritual experiences. After years of practicing spirituality themselves, they establish expert power, and many are recognized as spiritual teachers, gurus, or leaders.

Across spiritual traditions, this form of leader emergence occurs in different forms. For example, in Zen Buddhism, monks emerge as spiritual leaders after much time practicing and contemplating. The focus of this developmental period is brought to life in a line from the "Song of Angya," written by a Chinese Zen Master: *"Determined to leave his parents, what does he want to accomplish? He is a Buddhist, a homeless monk now, and no more a man of the world; His mind is ever intent on the mastery of Dharma,"* (Suzuki 5). In Gnosticism, a spiritual Master earns the ability to teach at a certain point along the Gnostic, spiritual path. This takes place after many years of spiritual practice and inner, spiritual development. Yogic sages and masters also emerge as leaders and teachers after many years of spiritual practice, specifically meditation and contemplation.

### 1.3 Referent Power

In addition to expert power, it is likely that their authority stems from referent power. For example, aspirants seem to hold high respect for these individuals and their spiritual nature. Further, when individuals start to develop spiritually internally, perhaps this is something that others recognize, particularly others who want to develop spiritually themselves. Though this spiritual quality is indescribable, one could argue that it gives the leader referent power—power to influence spiritual aspirants, motivating them to achieve similar qualities within themselves. While this form of referent power is not established in the theoretical literature in leadership studies, it seems appropriate to consider in the context of mystical traditions.

There are likely many ways that spiritual leaders derive power that go beyond the scope of scientific study. The nature of spiritual leadership in mystical traditions suggests that there is an esoteric layer to this. For example, there are some well-known spiritual leaders who many believe were actually born on earth for the purpose of teaching humanity (e.g., Jesus Christ).

## 1.4 Coercive Power of Persecutors

Additionally, we can consider the power of those who oppose spiritual leaders and mystical traditions. Many mystical traditions and their teachers are often opposed in various ways. Hindus, Jewish mystics, Sufis, Gnostics and other traditions have experienced this first-hand. Across cultures and throughout time, they have been persecuted and opposed in various ways. Often, this is through the use of coercive power, where persecutors use physical violence, create laws restricting the practice or teaching of mysticism, or dehumanize or defame their spiritual teachers. While referent power and expert power allow these spiritual leaders to help aspirants pursue their spiritual journeys, others have used coercive and position power to restrict their right to practice and to teach spirituality.

## 2. Spiritual Leadership Motivation

Situational, or *contingency*, models of leadership may be particularly relevant to understanding the ways in which spiritual leaders motivate followers. Most leadership scholars recognize that there are three elements of leadership: the leader, followers, and the context (Yukl). The relationships among the three are often depicted as a Venn diagram, illustrating the inter-connectedness of the three and the bi-directional influence. The center of the diagram illustrates that leaders and followers interact differently depending on the situation. For example, during times of crisis, the leader may be more direct with followers than during ordinary situations.

One conceptual model that takes this into account is the path-goal theory. Path-goal theory suggests that leaders can help followers to achieve their goals by motivating them, which will likely increase the effort followers devote to a task. Based on the expectancy theory of motivation, three elements are considered: the degree to which followers value the reward (valence); the degree to which followers believe that if they put forth effort they will perform well (expectancy); and the degree to which followers believe that if they perform well they will receive the reward (instrumentality) (House).

In the context of mystical traditions, path-goal theory may be particularly useful to understanding spiritual leadership. For example, when spiritual leaders describe their own mystical experiences or describe the benefits of enlightenment, mystical experience, and spiritual development, this likely motivates aspirants (valence). Further, when they encourage aspirants to keep attempting spiritual practice or to continue striving to gain intuitive understanding of truths, this can motivate aspirants (expectancy). Lastly, when spiritual leaders emphasize that anyone can have mystical experiences or reach enlightenment, that it is not reserved for certain people, this can motivate aspirants (instrumentality). These are just a few examples, and they may not apply to all traditions, but they illustrate the usefulness of this model to understanding spiritual leadership. A theme that underlies each of these is that the leaders are engaging in *sense-making* (Yukl). They are helping followers to make sense of the reality of the situation, and they are doing so based on their own perspective and experiences with spirituality.

According to the path-goal theory, the leader uses different approaches (i.e. directive, supportive, achievement-oriented, and/or participative approaches) depending on the specific context and needs of followers to increase valence, expectancy, and instrumentality to motivate followers. The extent to which spiritual leaders use those particular approaches is unclear, but they clearly take into account the situation when responding. For example, Zen Masters and Murshids take into account followers needs to suggest appropriate practices for spiritual development.

### 3. Leadership Styles and Approaches

In addition to considering how spiritual leaders may motivate aspirants, we can also consider the basic style or approaches that these leaders may use. Leadership experts have considered a range of styles or patterns of behavior associated with the role of leader. Many of these styles rest on substantial empirical study, such as transformational leadership. Others are still emerging theoretical

discussions, such as authentic leadership, reflecting a new and evolving academic discipline. Typically, these styles include various behaviors that are common in some way. For example, ethical leadership approaches involve a leader's strong focus on ethical decision-making behaviors. These styles also tend to center around a specific goal. For example, transformational leadership promotes follower performance beyond expectations. Authentic leadership focuses on developing authentic followers. Transforming leadership aims to establish positive, moral end-states such as equality. Each of these examples, and other leadership styles, are supported by much theoretical discussion in which very specific behaviors, processes, and outcomes are defined. Many leadership styles are relevant to the role of spiritual leader. We could use these models as a point of comparison to assess similarities across spiritual leaders of mystical traditions.

One leadership approach that is applied to the study of religious leaders is *servant leadership* (Greenleaf). Servant leadership theory was developed by Robert Greenleaf, who was inspired by the unique form of leadership displayed in the novel, "The Journey to the East" by Hermann Hesse (Hesse). In the story, Leo, the leader of an esoteric group referred to as "The League," demonstrates selfless service. He actually travels with the group on their journey; however, the group does not realize that they travel with the leader because Leo takes on the role of their servant.

Similarly, spiritual leaders in mystical traditions often demonstrate selflessness. A recent article on the privatization of enlightenment suggests that this is something which is generally expected in religious traditions (Wood). One could argue that religious and spiritual leaders of various traditions have typically sacrificed their self-interests in order to publicize their teachings and to help humanity, as opposed to introducing barriers or privatizing their teachings. Some make great sacrifices to help aspirants to achieve spiritual experiences and spiritual change.



In addition to demonstrating selflessness in their roles, spiritual leaders appear to demonstrate another aspect of servant leadership. Servant leaders are known to focus on follower development. They understand the developmental needs and even weaknesses of followers, and they attempt to create the conditions needed for followers to develop. In "The Journey to the East," Leo actually leaves the group that was on the journey. When he does this, the group falls apart, and the main character H.H. wanders aimlessly and confused for years, thinking that he was the last surviving member of the League. Leo's decision to leave could be considered cruel by some; however, it later gave H.H. the conditions needed to gain self-knowledge and to take steps toward enlightenment.

One could argue that a similar approach is demonstrated by spiritual leaders. Spiritual leaders in mystical traditions that seek a living journey to spiritual awakening likely use this approach. The leader's knowledge and understanding of the spiritual challenges of aspirants hint at a larger, esoteric role of the spiritual leader. Thus, the spiritual leader may have exceptional insight into the spiritual barriers of the aspirants. While this is intriguing to consider, it goes beyond the scope of servant leadership theory and leadership studies. Yet this esoteric aspect of spiritual leadership is unique to this leadership role. Spiritual leaders can use this capability to create opportunities for aspirants to obtain spiritual experience and to move forward on the spiritual path, which is alluded to in so many mystical texts. Beyond demonstrating selflessness and focusing on developing aspirants, spiritual leaders help aspirants in many other ways.

#### 4. Spiritual Leaders as Role Models and Symbols

An effective way that leaders influence followers in general is through modeling behaviors and attitudes (Oman and Thoresen). This is referred to as "social learning," and research shows that individuals learn a lot from watching others, particularly those in leadership roles (Bandura). Spiritual aspirants of mystical traditions view spiritual leaders as role models. They model a strong value for experiential understanding and spiritual practice, for example.

Of particular relevance to spiritual leadership, leaders may even be able to help followers to develop resilience by modeling it (Gardner and Schermerhorn). Resilience allows an individual to overcome obstacles and to persevere through difficulties. For mystical traditions, this is particularly important. Many spiritual practices are very simple and easy, yet they can be challenging.

For mystical traditions that focus on a spiritual path, perseverance seems even more important. Gnostic spiritual teacher, Belzebuub describes this in the following, *"True wisdom costs a great deal to achieve and requires intense effort, because we have to go through the curious situations of life that give rise to each particular ego in order to see and understand them and often those can be very painful situations,"* (Belzebuub Week 3, 2).

A recent study published in the *International Journal for the Psychology of Religion* uniquely illustrates the influence of "spiritual models." The researchers designed a college course in which assignments focused the attention of students on spiritual models, including well-known figures and people that they knew personally. Spiritual models, in the context of the study portrayed in the journal, were individuals who demonstrated exemplary moral strengths and virtues. Although these models had not necessarily achieved union with divinity, the general processes by which these leaders influenced students is similar to how mystical spiritual leaders influence aspirants (Oman, Flinder and Thoreson, *Integrating Spiritual Modeling*).

Psychologist, Israella Silberman elaborated on the processes of spiritual role-modeling, using religious and even mystical spiritual leaders of Judaism to illustrate its effects. She suggested that spiritual role modeling plays a key role in religion and mystical traditions, and that it is useful for aspirants. Through spiritual role modeling, she suggests that aspirants are able to witness virtues, such as perseverance, courage, and self-control in action (Silberman).

Furthermore, those who emerge as spiritual leaders become symbols of spiritual development for aspirants. They represent the possibilities of spiritual practice and enlightenment. Aspirants can

see that spiritual states and even profound spiritual transformation are possible, here on earth, and as discussed earlier, this increases motivation (instrumentality). Knowing that someone else has accomplished spiritual development builds intrigue and encourages aspirants to try.

Beyond this motivational force, spiritual leaders often symbolize strength and courage, as many are subjected to criticism and persecution. Labeled as heretics and even subjected to violence, throughout history and even in modern times, these spiritual leaders can be symbols of perseverance. In addition to serving as role models and symbols, spiritual leaders also have a direct role in providing spiritual practices and guidance.

## 5. Practical Approaches and Guidance

In many religions, leaders are responsible for administering religious traditions and rituals, counseling, serving as the authority on religious laws, and other roles. In spiritual traditions, however, the leader's functions appear to focus instead on providing practical guidance to spiritual aspirants. This is reflected in the term Upanishad, which means to receive spiritual teachings from an enlightened one, a spiritual leader or guru (Nauman).

In modern Gnosticism and Sufism, spiritual leaders guide aspirants along a spiritual path. In Gnosticism, this guidance is based on wisdom derived from personal experiences, which they use to help aspirants to experience spiritual transformation and mystical states. Beyond guidance on spiritual practices, they may give guidance about that spiritual path, which only someone with experience could give.

In Sufism, the role of the Murshid is highly revered. The Murshid is expected to guide the aspirant on a spiritual journey using specific practices based on the needs of the aspirant. The importance of spiritual masters in Sufism is captured in this quote by Rumi: "*Choose a master, for without him this journey is full of tribulations, fears, and*

*dangers,*" (Hickey). The Murshid helps the aspirant to make sense of opportunities and threats to spiritual development.

Similarly, in Zen Buddhism, teachers play an important role in guiding students through meditation and other spiritual practices, as well as along the Buddhist path. One could argue that, if an aspirant is truly searching for a spiritual path of that nature, a defined path of some kind, then they would greatly benefit from the advice and guidance of someone who had already taken those steps. If we are to assume that such a path does or could exist, then this means that spiritual leaders have the potential to help people to transform into spiritual beings, to end suffering, to experience enlightenment, and more.

While spiritual leaders can guide and advise aspirants, the aspirant must actually practice and experience for themselves. Sufism, Gnosticism, and other mystical traditions emphasize this. It is evident throughout the teachings of Zen Buddhism: "*Peace comes from within. Do not seek it without*" (Gautama Buddha). The responsibility of gaining direct experience is also emphasized in Vedanta, for example, Ramakrishna explained the following:

There are pearls in the deep sea, but you must hazard all perils to get them. If you fail to get at them by a single dive, do not conclude that the sea is without them. Dive again and again, and you are sure to be rewarded in the end. So also in the quest for the Lord, if your first attempt to see Him proves fruitless, do not lose heart. Persevere in the attempt, and you are sure to realize Him at last (Ramakrishna)

Another way that spiritual leaders have guided aspirants towards wisdom and understanding is through parables, metaphors, and esoteric writings. Parables are stories that can have a deeper, hidden meaning. They are often presented to aspirants, who strive to grasp the hidden meaning of the teachings. These teachings are particularly relevant to spiritual traditions in which aspirants aim to gain intuitive knowledge and truths.

An example of this is in the *Fawa'id al-Fu'ad*, a well-known collection of spiritual teachings that is revered in Sufism. In the collection, the spiritual teacher Shaykh Nizam ad-din Awliya gives guidance on how to live a moral life, emphasizing the need to help others to become free from suffering, for example. In the story that follows, the Shaykh addresses the concerns of an aspirant who worries about money by telling him a story, rather than giving direct advice:

Though the Brahman was very wealthy, the chief magistrate of that city fined him, seized all his possessions and reduced him to poverty. That Brahman became destitute. He was hard pressed to make ends meet. One day he came across a friend. "How are you?" asked the friend. "Well and happy," replied the Brahman. "How can you be happy?" retorted the friend; "everything has been taken from you." "With me still," replied the Brahman, "is my sacred thread (*zunnar*)." (Awliya and Awliya 9)

Similarly, modern Gnostics regard the book entitled *The Flight of the Feathered Serpent* as a resource of spiritual teachings. The book discloses the relationship between the revered Jesus Christ and his disciple Judas Iscariot, although it was published before the Gospel of Judas was discovered and finally translated in 2006. The book was written by Armando Cosani, a journalist, who befriended a man who later reveals the esoteric nature of the events surrounding Jesus's death. Beyond this unimaginable revelation, the text also includes a multitude of teachings that Gnostics associate with the spiritual teacher Judas Iscariot. In the first section, the symbolic relevance of the act that Judas is most known for is put into personal terms as the reader observes Armando sacrifice his relationship with God for material rewards (e.g., a lucrative career, parties, prestige, etc...). The reader witnesses the man "selling" his soul. Other layers of parabolic teaching are demonstrated throughout the book, as Armando's friend teaches him through parables and finally gives Armando writings to publish which would reveal the nature of his relationship with Jesus Christ. The writings also include compelling spiritual teachings that urge the reader to seek truth and justice, and to *wake-up* spiritually (Cosani).

The poems and writings of Sufi poets provide a great example of this form of leadership, as well. Here is an example from the 13<sup>th</sup> Century poet Jalâl al-Dîn Rûmî: The spiritual breeze burnishes the breast of all sorrow; let the breath be stopped but for a moment, and annihilation will come upon the spirit. The soul, a stranger in the world, is yearning for the city of placelessness; why, O why does the bestial spirit continue so long to graze? Pure, goodly soul, how long will you journey on? You are the King's falcon; fly back toward the Emperor's whistle! (Rûmî 10)

Other Sufi poets, including Hafiz, and Jami taught in similar ways. Finally, another example is the use of koans that allow the aspirant to reach new realizations through meditation in Zen Buddhism. Each of these examples reflect a general pattern in the way that spiritual leaders of mystical traditions teach.

## 6. Reflections on Spiritual Leadership

In this paper, the role of spiritual leader in mystical traditions has been explored using major frameworks from the leadership studies discipline. The main focus of the paper is on leaders and leadership; however, understanding the characteristics of those who emerge as leaders in mystical traditions gives insight into the values of their aspirants, as well. Underlying these different mystical approaches is a fundamental value for spiritual experience and/or spiritual qualities as sources of power.

What does such a preference for guidance based on the leaders' spiritual experiences imply about aspirants of these traditions? It supports the notion that these traditions value the experiential understanding and direct connection with the spiritual. Further, it raises interesting questions regarding how spiritual aspirants recognize or assess the authenticity of spiritual leaders when spiritual development and wisdom are difficult to measure. Perhaps spiritual aspirants are equipped with tools to sense this authenticity, through their own efforts at spiritual practice, their mystical experiences, or even their level of spiritual development. Some traditions (e.g.,

Gnosticism) even encourage aspirants to verify the authenticity of spiritual leaders through esoteric and spiritual practices. From a leadership studies perspective, no other leadership context allows for this dynamic, making the context of spiritual leadership in mystical traditions exceptional. Another interesting conclusion of this analysis is that the nature of spiritual leadership is quite paradoxical.

## 7. Paradoxical Nature of Spiritual Leadership

Mystics are encouraged to seek the truth themselves, through personal experience. In contemporary spirituality, many popular writers who give advice on spiritual matters even suggest that aspirants do nothing but look within. Yet, research suggests that many eventually seek further guidance because they fail to find answers right away, and one could only imagine that there are many other possible outcomes.

Although many accept that ultimately truth lies within, there is still a place for spiritual guidance. Having the answers within, being able to find truth directly through one's experience, is compatible with receiving spiritual guidance. In fact, one could argue that spiritual guidance from an authentic teacher is critically important. Inspired by their perseverance and empowered by their guidance and practical advice, aspirants of mystical traditions can avoid pitfalls and recognize opportunities for spiritual transformation through spiritual leadership.

However, spiritual teachers appear to have a great challenge. Authentic spiritual leaders have gained wisdom through experience, and yet they cannot simply teach aspirants through lecture or explanations alone. Rather, they tend to provide ways for aspirants to gain the same understanding directly, particularly through spiritual practices. For those traditions that follow a specific spiritual path, the leader has an even larger responsibility, which could be esoteric in nature. All of this highlights an important, but understudied leadership role.

Perhaps their approach to leading makes it difficult to recognize the impact they have. Leadership scholars study business leaders, politicians, activists, and many others who have incredible responsibilities and influence on societies. However, if one accepts that there is an afterlife and a chance to experience profound, spiritual transformation, then, could anything compare to the role of spiritual teacher, guiding aspirants toward eternal goals? Could any outcome compare to spiritual transformation, enlightenment, or salvation? While the role of spiritual leader is largely ignored, it is arguably the most significant form of leadership that exists.

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