

Transformational Leadership and the God Leaders Serve and Represent

Janet K. Ruffing

Yale Divinity School, New Haven, CT, USA

Abstract

Leaders of male religious congregations are challenged to achieve genuinely transformative leadership as the spiritual leaders of their communities. Contemporary leadership theory helps identify the tasks and advantages of servant or spiritual leadership within religious organizations. As male leaders within the church and their particular communities, these leaders also symbolically represent their particular image of God which may be uncritically rooted in early experiences of childhood. If leaders reflect on how they personally relate to God, they may recognize inadequate images of God through critical reflection. If they allow their own images of God to evolve and mature, as leaders who symbolically represent God, they may offer considerable healing to their members.

Introduction

Leaders of religious institutes of men as well as clergy who exercise leadership roles within the church espouse a vision of transformational leadership that presupposes personal integrity and altruistic or servant leadership. Transformational leaders demonstrate both managerial skills and a deep sense of a call to leadership. Vocationally, this implies particularly in religious organizations that leaders are spiritually rooted in a deep and ever-changing relationship with the Divine and psychologically healthy, mature, relational persons, capable of

ongoing personal growth. Authentic spiritual leadership is rooted in who leaders are and deepens through their capacity for life-long learning, adaptation to changing circumstances, and their ability to rise to unforeseen challenges. Positional leaders who are religious or clergy also symbolically represent God in whose name they serve.

The theory of transformational leadership emphasizes that leaders promote institutional change and transformation in the face of constant change. Two models preceded this one: the great person or the innate leadership trait model and the bureaucratic transactional manager.

Leadership theory no longer places all leadership qualities in an identified leader whom all in the organization follow. The military exemplifies this view of leadership and other hierarchical organizations that allow little room for followers to exercise leadership. As a result, the leader is always susceptible to being displaced by a rival. Unfortunately, the great person model of leadership has remained the preferred model within Roman Catholic clerical culture.

Transactional leadership followed the great person model and emphasized the existence of multiple transactions between the leader and others in the organization. While this theory recognized an interactive role between the designated or managerial leader and others, it identified the relationship as a system of manipulation or exchange, through rewards and punishments rather than being genuinely relational.

The model of transformational leadership, instead, emphasizes a relational style of leadership, recognizing that leaders are present in every level of an organization and that healthy organizations have multiple potential actors and leaders. The challenges facing all organizations today require transformational leaders to enlist all of the leadership within their organization. Transformational leaders release the creativity, competency, dedication, and energy of all within the organization to serve its shared mission. This remains the preferred model of leadership today and in explicitly religious contexts is sometimes named "spiritual" leadership. (Dooan, 2007: 35-52)

Transformational Leadership

In transformational leadership, the relationship between leaders and others is critical. Leaders are constantly challenged to develop leadership, secure commitment and create meaning-making throughout the group and succeed in "spiritlinking leadership," because of "their reflective depth and psychological equilibrium." (Markham, 1999: 124)

Transformational leaders support the transformation of an organization at deep levels. They deal with day-to-day issues and routine matters but are also attentive to the deeper needs of the members of the organization and growth and change in the organization. According to Donna Markham,

Spiritlinking leadership forms the basis of the effective exercise of participative authority and the formation of strategic teams that spend as much time in reflective examination of contemporary interpretations of the mission as they do in the hard work of achieving it. Participative authority is not synonymous with democracy. Having influence and being listened to, being valued and supported, and sharing deeply held values is not the same as having a vote. (124)

Ron Heifetz and others writing about transformational leadership emphasize the role of leaders in providing a safe and firm holding environment that facilitates organizations undergoing rapid change or internal transformation that supports and encourages participants in the process to do the hard work of change. That means expecting and managing resistance to the change as well as to the leader who represents it. This is the second most important reason for leaders to be healthy psychologically and spiritually. Managing adaptive change rather than routine organizational processes requires stamina, belief in the mission and the group, and the ability to tolerate the personal attacks on leaders who are asking more than the usual of a group.

Clericalism Impedes Transformational Leadership

Unfortunately, the clerical system and its resulting clericalism discourage the development of transformative leadership among its office-holders affecting both leaders of men's communities as well as other forms of church leadership. The Conference of Major Superiors of Men published a paper on clericalism thirty years ago that remains insightful. They defined clericalism:

as the conscious or unconscious concern to promote the particular interests of the clergy and to protect the privileges and power that have traditionally been conceded to those in the clerical state. There are attitudinal, behavioral and institutional dimensions to the phenomenon of clericalism. Clericalism arises from both personal and social dynamics, is expressed in various cultural forms, and personal and social dynamics, and often is reinforced by institutional structures. Among its chief manifestations are an authoritarian style of ministerial leadership, a rigidly hierarchical world view, and a virtual identification of the holiness and

grace of the church with the clerical state and, thereby, with the cleric himself. As such, clericalism is particularly evident in the ordained clergy, though it does not pertain exclusively to it. Persons other than clerics can exhibit the traits of clericalism. . . . Generally speaking, exclusive, elitist or dominating behavior can be engaged in by any person or group within the church.

Although this wider application of the meaning of clericalism should be kept in mind, it is nevertheless important to emphasize that its basic meaning pertains to ordained ministers, who can appeal to the structures and expectations of office in the church to justify inappropriate attitudes and behavior that are ultimately counter-productive for the church's life and mission.

At the same time it must be stressed that clericalism is to be distinguished from ordained ministry and priesthood as such. It is neither identical with nor a necessary consequence of priesthood, but a diminishment and distortion of it. (CMSM. 1983, 2-3).

Conflict for Leaders in Men's Religious Communities: Prophetic or Clerical

Religious life is inherently prophetic because of its charismatic nature. If religious communities embrace an evolving, authentic vision and actual embodiment of their charisms and their particular appropriation of the Gospel, they create and nurture a genuine community or communion at the heart of Christian life and its mission to the world. Male religious communities, however, both members and elected leaders, need to be vigilant about the pressure exerted by ecclesial office holders to co-opt religious life and its governance processes into its dominating clerical system. This system embodies the "royal consciousness," the dominative power which the prophet unmasks but also points to a new way of life in response to the in-break of the reigning of God.

In *Prophets in their Own Country*, Sandra Schneiders identifies religious life as a prophetic lifeform and describes how women's religious life embraced it. "The task is to bear witness to God by word and work, to God's people in a particular context or historical situation." (2011: 85) Prophets adopt particular metaphors and symbolic strategies but they also engage in symbolic actions. Some of these are highly provocative (86-87). According to Marcus Borg, Jesus bore witness "to God as compassion and to justice as God's dream for humanity." (Borg, Ch 7) Schneiders' summary of this theme is stunning:

The God of Jesus was not only compassionate but compassion itself. In God there was no wrath, no violence, no vengeance or retaliation. Jesus' God drew no boundaries between those on the

inside and those on the outside, the good sheep and the lost, the sinners and the upright, the clean and the unclean God had no purity requirements. The God of Jesus sent rain and sun on the just and unjust alike (see Mt. 5:45). Jesus' Abba was the parent of the prodigal, a God who was inconceivable in a legalistic framework where good and evil were rigorously defined and rewards and punishments stringently applied. The infinite compassion of God filled the heart of Jesus and poured out of him in is practice of total inclusivity and boundless free forgiveness. (87)

While women's communities became for the most part critical of the "royal consciousness" embedded in clericalism and rejected all forms of domination, men's communities, embedded as they are in the clerical system, often straddle two worlds. Some members have embraced profoundly prophetic forms of ministry, especially in the context of social justice, yet their communities remain susceptible to pressure toward clericalism. Congregations of brothers have moved communally closer to the prophetic edge than have some clerical or mixed communities because brothers consciously rejected clerical status as intrinsic to their vocation. Certainly, many men's communities claim members who live this prophetic call explicitly.

The "God" Leaders Serve and Represent

Within the context of transformational leadership and the prophetic impulse of religious life, it is important to recognize that male religious and clergy both relate to God personally in a variety of ways. The prophetic impulse of religious life requires a vibrant life of prayer that is deeply open to God's inspiration. This on-going, personal relationship with God grounds transformational leaders in their vocation to ministerial service and their response to the needs of God's people and of their communities. It is precisely this spiritual depth that funds, "spiritlinking" leadership, and in psychologically healthy leaders, enables them to create meaning-making in their particular context, as well as to embody a quality of spiritual equilibrium and deep trust in God. As official ecclesial leaders, they both serve God and "represent" God. What is the God they serve like? Does their personal image of God correspond to the way Jesus describes the character of God or does it correspond to the way God has been represented by "clericalism" as an absolute monarch? Leaders of male religious communities reveal the "God" they serve as well as represent "God" to those they serve both within their communities as leaders and as public ministers in the church.

Representations of God

Brother Emmanuel of Taizé in *Love, Imperfectly Known: Beyond Spontaneous Representation of God* brings unusual clarity to these themes. While, there may be no single trajectory of development psychoanalytically and relationally over time, adult believers change and develop in the way they relate to God and Jesus. Religious life is fundamentally discipleship of Jesus. And religious are called to such affective intimacy with Jesus through the Spirit that they embody Jesus' way of being, relating, and ministering. This also includes accurately representing to others the character of God Jesus revealed in his ministry, life, death, and resurrection. A believer's personal image of Jesus is formed and reformed over time. It is influenced by meditation on the Gospels, contemplative prayer, Biblical studies, preaching, and corresponds to a person's stage of adult development. One's image of Jesus is constantly changing in relationship to a person's psychological development and to their experience of Jesus in prayer and meditation and in the exemplary way others live their Christian lives — the testimony of the Saints and of the saintly people in the church. All of this constitutes a conscious appropriation of the Christian mysteries, but everyone is also influenced by unconscious factors.

These unconscious factors are rooted in early childhood experiences with significant adults, and they tend to become the basis of our images of God. These unconscious representations of God from childhood are intimately linked with the way authority was experienced in childhood and influence the way one exercises authority as an adult. It remains an ascetical task (a discipline) to be willing to reflect on these spontaneous God representations and consciously deconstruct them if they are contrary to who God reveals Godself to be.

Inadequate Religious Language Impedes Relationship with God

Brother Emmanuel reflects on how language about God impedes or supports the ability to imagine and embrace a God who moves toward women and men with unconditional love and whose deepest desire is for a mutuality of loving communion with every single person. He also reflects on a God who constantly draws near to people and desires a response rooted in freedom rather than in guilt.

In *Love, Imperfectly Known*, Bro. Emmanuel deconstructs religious language and theological explanations that obscure or prevent the development of men and women, sinners and saints alike, from believing and responding to God precisely as Love which is the core

message of Jesus. "God is Love." (1Jn 4:16) He believes God seeks to overcome the distance between humans and God.

A God of Excessive Transcendence

In his chapter, "Freeing Ourselves from a Distant God," Bro. Emmanuel develops a psychoanalytic interpretation that asserts that the unconscious, narcissistic wound born of the human struggle between dependence on powerful others and the permanent need to ask others to do things one cannot do for oneself creates a God representation that is distant and non-relational. Persons, as children, also envy the apparent omnipotence of parental figures, made worse for many by humiliation suffered when parents or other authorities "do not respect the child as an autonomous person in the making." Emmanuel says: "All these elements are highly likely to foster in the unconscious a confusion between a state of grandeur linked to personal accomplishment and a state of self-sufficiency whose highest manifestation would be not only not to turn to anyone for help but also, in thrall to reactionary narcissism, no longer to want to create too strong a link with anyone at all." (2011: 59). This is one example of how he unmasks the way unconscious processes obscure and mar representations of God. He shows how theologies, also created under the influence of unconscious processes, reinforce such versions of grandeur and explain "why we fail to mistrust various versions of this distant, even impassive God, who is content to sit enthroned in authority and does not have any aspirations to relate to others." (59) From a psychological perspective, Emmanuel says that a:

healthy autonomy is thought to support human fulfillment and growth by enabling us to build chosen, positive relationships, and for some of us these will culminate in married, parental or fraternal love. This reverses the representation of divine transcendence corresponding to the fullest and most perfect state of grandeur possible. The grandeur and perfection of divine transcendence are closer to the ultimate expression of the desire and real capacity to lead flourishing and constructive interpersonal relationships. The more faith recognizes the link between the mystery of God and the mystery of love, the more the grandeur of divine transcendence will be linked to such a God's capacity and desire to have loving relationships with human beings, and not to keep God at a distance in cold self-sufficiency. (60)

It is remarkable to notice that the new English Translation of the Sacramentary adopted just this language of "excessive transcendence" for God. This can have the effect of overemphasizing this particular

representation of God in the public prayer of the church. It will take particular effort on the part of the clergy to minister in such a way that models the closeness of God and God's compassion to God's people, despite this unfortunate language choice.

Brother Emmanuel treats several other equally inadequate representations of God which cannot be treated here. In summary, he argues that only by careful reflection on one's projections onto God, can one discover how early unnamed and unknown childhood experiences distort representations of God. This interaction between one's unconscious process of projection (rooted in early childhood) and one's representations of God impede the ability to represent God as unconditional love who created human persons for a mutuality of loving with God and with one another.

Without this critical reflection that allows a person to withdraw one's unconscious projects, a leader not only promotes representations of God that are not worthy of a God of incessant searching love for people, but also fosters internal obstacles to imagining how much God desires to relate to people in this way. The emergence of each God representation requires careful reflection about where its root is in the self and how it manifests in one's relationship to God or in language about God in ministry or in the exercise of authority. Emmanuel proposes that once one understands the relationship between particular early childhood experiences and the unconscious residue involved, it becomes possible to recognize and reject unworthy God representations by critical reflection. Among the inadequate God representations he discusses are the following: a "God who permits evil," a harsh and punitive God, a domineering, dominating God who requires a person to keep one's distance, a powerful figure rather than an intimate, all the conscious and unconscious conflicts projected onto God as either father or mother, or both. He carefully describes how either parental image can constellate positive or negative transferences toward God for persons of either sex.

He persuasively argues that any representation of God that inhibits, distorts, or blocks one's ability to relate to God in a reciprocally loving way is inadequate and to some extent is based on unconscious desires, fears, or responses to a person's internal dynamics. He advocates an ascetical process of reflection and self-monitoring that allows these projections to come to light and then choose to withdraw them, thereby allowing God to draw close in a reciprocity of love. In a kindly way, Bro. Emmanuel asserts that these projections onto God are spontaneous representations, and that growth into the fullness of humanity and relationship with God requires critical examination of

these representations for how they support or discourage a reciprocally loving relationship with God or with others.

Throughout, Bro. Emmanuel carefully and continually advises that representations of God are just that - spontaneous representations and not God. However, if these representations of God are reinforced by theological arguments and seem to be identified with doctrine, they became even more difficult to dislodge.

God's reciprocal love neither dominates nor consumes another, and lay religious strive to manifest this same love in and through their ministries and their communal lives. For clerics, the dynamics are less clear.

The cleric in some theologies of priesthood is the representative of Christ himself, in *persona Christi*, who represents God HIMSELF. The exclusive use of masculine language for God unconsciously reinforces that God is actually a male person, and only males represent him. Bro. Emmanuel comments that relationally destructive representations of God often reveal themselves to the congregation and to the preacher by slipping out unbeknownst to him. Its most widespread manifestation is perhaps:

expressed during a sermon or a Bible reading or, . . . when the intonation of the human voice imagines it is reproducing the divine voice by suddenly becoming firm, strict, almost tyrannical. This process takes many other forms, among which we may list . . . the pronouncement of uncompromising judgments uttered in God's name, the authoritarian gestures of a preacher, the heaviness of certain religious rituals, the excessive ornamentation of liturgical vestments etc. If such manifestations are sometimes motivated by a sincere desire to pay homage to divine grandeur, the question still needs to be asked: in honor of what divine grandeur? That of a king surrounded by his obedient and servile court? That of a dictator worshipped by a mob that is really afraid? In any case it is difficult to perceive the grandeur of a God whose mystery is closely linked to the mystery of love. (55-56)

Jesus, of course, rejected such a view of God — his beloved Abba. He came as one who serves not as one to be served. He called us friends, not servants.

These unconscious dynamics around one's God representations are universal. They happen and surprise. One discovers that what one thought one really believed about God, is not so firm. Everyone experiences such slips and through doing so discovers an internal obstacle to the intimate and reciprocal love God constantly offers. When

these incursions happen, one is again invited to conversion. This is part of the on-going process of critical reflection and conversion of leaders who open themselves to God in ever deeper ways as they continue to grow.

Men in religious leadership also hold positional authority and leadership responsibilities for their congregations, including the lives of their members and their sponsored ministries. This is a complex responsibility. Leaders hold real authority and are responsible for the managerial oversight of complex institutions. The role of congregational leader, in most instances, "the provincial," or another position on the council with delegated responsibility is subject to the same unconscious authority projections and expectations that members project onto God. Men in religious leadership act in the name of God or Christ for the sake of the community. What difference does it make if the leader espouses the servant leadership role described by Robert Greenleaf, modeled on Jesus in the Gospels? Is there a difference?

Congregational members as well as leaders bring similar wounds of childhood inflicted by less than perfect parents and by the inevitable unconscious conflicts everyone suffers in the ordinary process of development. How a leader exercises authority and leadership has the potential for healing some of the wounds related to authority or further exacerbating them. Heifetz and Parks distinguish between "personality and presence" in the theory of adaptive leadership. This means:

when leadership is about making progress with adaptive issues, charisma and personality are not the defining realities of leadership, rather it is the "quality of one's capacity to be fully present, comprehend what is happening, hold steady in the field of action, and make choices regarding when and how to intervene from within the social group in ways that help the group to make progress on swamp issues. (Parks, 2005: 11)

The capacity to remain fully present and involved is more important than one's bright idea or preferences. Attentiveness in the present moment helps the group members work their way through a complicated situation without necessarily deciding for them. Adaptive issues are those that do not have a technical solution. The leader cannot call in an expert to resolve it. The congregational leader together with key members or all members in the congregation have to arrive at the solution together. This type of process is not leader-centered. In a religious organization it is about the mission, about what God is inviting the group to, and about what holds heart and meaning for the

members as well as for the leader. It requires enormous trust in God and in the members.

Conclusion

Men in leadership need to be conscious of the extremely complex projections they carry in their leadership role. These projections are rooted in the parental history of those they lead. Members with a relatively healthy relationship with power and authority who experienced adults listened to them, loved them, and kept them safe will have a greater ability to partner with leaders for the sake of the future of the congregation. Members from widely disparate cultures will bring quite different expectations and ways of interacting with authority. Members who have primarily experienced those in authority as oppressive and alienating have long learned how to tell the leader what they think the leader wants to hear and will have little ability to tell the truth about themselves or their ministries.

Religious leaders also have enormous opportunity to engage members, especially in ways that might open new possibilities. While important functions of authority are to provide orientation and direction, set norms, and resolve conflicts, leaders might be able to make God's love approachable if they can represent a loving God who seeks out and expands the capacity of human persons to reciprocate God's love. That can happen, however, only if leaders are able to exercise authority prophetically with love, compassion, and steadiness. The transformational leader's relationships with members has the capacity to affect how they perceive and experience the God leaders serve and the God leaders represent. The potential for releasing members' apostolic energies in the process might be amazing.

References:

- Borg, M. (2006) *Jesus: Uncovering the Life, Teachings, and Relevance of a Religious Revolutionary*. San Francisco: Harper.
- "Clericalism" CMSM Documentation, April 8, 1983.
- Doohan, L. (2007) *Spiritual Leadership: The Quest for Integrity*. Mahwah: Paulist Press.
- Brother Emmanuel, (2011) *Love, Imperfectly Known: Beyond Spontaneous Representations of God*. New York: Continuum.
- Greenleaf, R. (1998) *The Power of Servant Leadership*, ed. by Larry C. Spears. San Francisco: Berrett-Koehler and (1977) *Servant Leadership: A Journey into the Nature of Legitimate Power and*

Heifetz, R. Grashow, A. and Linsky, M. (2009) *The Practice of Adaptive Change: Tools and Tactics for Changing your Organization and the World*. Boston: Harvard Business School Press.

Heifetz, R. and Linsky, M. (2002) *Leadership on the Line: Staying Alive through the Dangers of Leading* Boston: Harvard Business School Press.

Heifetz, R. (1998) *Leadership without Easy Answers*. Boston: Harvard Business School Press.

Markham, D. (1999) *Spiritlinking Leadership: Working through Resistance to Organizational Change*. Mahwah: Paulist.

Parks, S. (2005) *Leadership Can be Taught*. Boston: Harvard Business School Press.

Schneiders, S. (2011) *Prophets in their Own Country: Women Religious Bearing Witness to the Gospel in a Troubled Church*. Maryknoll: Orbis.