

LEAD RESEARCH SERIES

Religion & Leadership

Ancient wisdom for a modern world?

Contents

Executive Summary	2
1. We need to talk about religion & leadership	3
Religion is a social fact	3
Religion matters for leadership	4
2. Pitfalls	5
Worldly negligence	5
Non-critical reasoning	5
Exclusivity	6
Claims to divine right	7
3. Opportunities	10
Personal harmony	10
Deeper meaning	10
Social caring	11
Lived values	11
4. Conclusion: Engaging with religion and moving forward	13
Five ways to engage with religion	13
Moving forward	14
Annex	15
Methodology	15
About the author	15
Bibliography	16
Acknowledgements	17
About LEAD	17

Executive Summary

How does religion impact leadership today?
What are the opportunities and pitfalls
for society at large? How can we constructively
engage with religion?

These questions lie at the core of this project. In order to answer them, we conducted a 18-month study that involved a literature screening, over 30 interviews with religious leaders of secular organizations in Germany, and a workshop with 15 carefully selected leaders from diverse sectors with a Jewish, Christian, and Islamic background.

The result: Religion plays a decisive role for many leaders and organizations, yet is a taboo in leadership research and practice. Like leadership, it is both deeply personal and profoundly social. Importantly, religion is a double-edged sword that can cause both harm and good in leaders and beyond. If its pitfalls are overcome and opportunities embraced, it can be an anchor and compass for individuals, organizations, and societies in a complex world.

Chapter 1 highlights that religion is a social fact and that it is time to talk about religion and leadership.

Chapter 2 zooms in on the potential dark side of religion. It details four pitfalls and how to overcome them through contextual and inclusive leadership. These include: worldly negligence, non-critical reasoning, exclusivity claim and a belief in divine right.

Chapter 3 focuses on religion as a potential force for good. It presents four opportunities and how to embrace them through holistic and moral leadership. These include: personal harmony, deeper meaning, social caring and lived values.

Chapter 4 underlines the need to engage constructively with religion and its impact on leadership. It suggests five ways to induce its positive potential.

1. We need to talk about religion & leadership

Religion is a taboo in leadership practice. While senior executives today feel comfortable talking about their meditation or yoga practices, almost nobody talks about their faith. Yet, whether we personally adhere to a faith or not, many around us do. And strongly so. Religion is a social fact that does have an influence on leadership and our organizations. It is time to talk about its impact on leadership.

Religion is a social fact

Religion is a taboo, at least in Western societies. We do not talk about it much in leadership research or practice. In fact, it is largely ignored, sometimes even strongly opposed.

In 2008, a campaign in London made this very explicit: "There's probably no God. Now stop worrying and enjoy your life", was painted on many of the emblematic red buses. A colleague at Oxford, the famous atheist Richard Dawkins, contributed to the campaign, which raised over 150,000 pounds in funding.

On the other hand, 84 % of the world and 70 % of the German population is somewhat religiously affiliated.¹ For some, faith is the "ultimate concern" of their existence, placed at the center of their lives.² We live in what Jürgen Habermas calls a "post-secular society".³ In many ways religion is again on the rise, and has never really disappeared in this world. The American sociologist Rodney Stark puts it rather harshly that the secularization "doctrine" should be carried "to the graveyard of failed theories".⁴ Instead, we need to engage with religion as a social reality.

Whether we individually believe in a religion or not, people around us do. Religion is clearly a social fact. It influences how people live, work, and lead. Understanding and respecting religion is important for leaders, as it has such a big influence on the lives of many. If we want to fully understand leadership today, we need to stop ignoring religion.

1 Pew Research Center (2012); Pollak & Müller (2013)

2 Tillich (1957)

3 Habermas (2001)

4 Stark (1999: 270)

So what does a post-secular understanding of leadership look like? If religion is out there, whether we agree with it or not, what meaning does it carry for leaders? To understand its impact is of interest to us all. In fact, it may help us become better leaders in a complex world.

Religion matters for leadership

For this study, we interviewed religious leaders to better understand how faith affects their leadership behavior. In our meetings, we have seen religious symbols and practices. A city mayor told us that the cross in his office reminded him to stay humble. A CEO used an app to remember to pause, repose, and pray during hectic working hours in this fast-paced world. The app served as a stop sign to make time to reflect his actions: why am I doing all this? Another CEO placed a stone on her office desk. It prompted her to remember the woman taken in adultery and Jesus' intervention (Gospel of John, 8:7), "Whoever is without sin among you, let him be the first to cast a stone at her." For the CEO, this was a physical reminder that it is not only her employees who make mistakes. She does too.

Many religious leaders and followers may not rely on such tools or symbols. Yet, we have come across many examples of how faith fundamentally impacts leadership principles, practices, and processes. The belief in a God, for instance, can encourage leaders to be servants to both God and their followers – based in a strong faith in service. The Hereafter gives an 'extra-ordinary' purpose beyond the finite boundaries of the world: a leader aspiring toward something transcendental, other-worldly and eternal that offers a sense of responsibility and calmness. Furthermore, sacred scriptures serve as an anchor that provides guidance and advice in rapidly changing times.

Equally, our study shows that religion can also have a dark side. Interview partners stressed that leaders might use their belief in God and scripture to 'divinely sanction' their rigid and inflexible leadership styles. Leaders may neglect this world, enact a harmful interpretation of religion and lead astray. Faith can be used as a very destructive force.

Religion is a double-edged sword. Its pitfalls and opportunities are real. To ignore the impact of religion on leadership is to also ignore its potential harms and benefits. We will explore both sides in the next two chapters.

2. Pitfalls

If practiced in a non-reflective way and taken to an extreme, religious beliefs among leaders can actually threaten individual, organizational, and societal order, harmony, and advancement. In the following, we classify four pitfalls that religious leaders can fall into in their leadership practice: neglecting this world, being uncritical in their reasoning, exclusively supporting their own faith group, and sanctioning their deeds through a divine right. These pitfalls can be countered through a contextual and inclusive understanding of leadership.

Worldly negligence

It was said that in the 7th century the second Muslim caliph Umar once saw two people in a mosque praying for a long period of time. He approached them and asked what they did for a living. They replied by saying that they beg in the mosque so they were able to pray all day and night. Umar sent them out telling them to work during the day and pray at night.

Like those two seemingly devout men in the story, religious leaders may focus their personal leadership practices entirely on a Hereafter and neglect their responsibilities in this world. They may seclude themselves, ignore organizational purpose, or disregard societal well-being. This can be harmful for themselves, for their organizations, and for society. As an interviewee asserts:

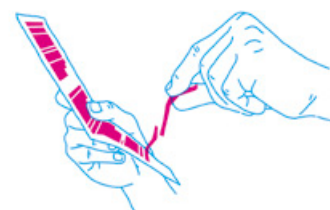
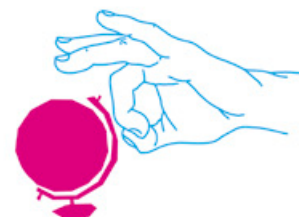
"Unfortunately, leaders who become too narrowly focused on a Hereafter simply do not see the pathway towards it. This can be very destructive."

How do we deal with this? Workshop participants highlighted that religion actually obliges people to take care of and act well in this world. The Hereafter is reached through this world and not in opposition to it. This world is conceived as a stepping stone towards the next. Their understanding puts this world into, but not out of perspective. This requires re-thinking about this world vis-à-vis an afterlife.

"If I am conscious that at the end of my life the punctuation is not a period (.) but rather a colon (:), then I do conceive myself as someone who will be held accountable."

Non-critical reasoning

Another pitfall for leaders is taking scripture too literally. Sacred scriptures frequently function as a manual and an inspiration for religious leaders. These texts are hundreds and thousands of years old, yet they are expected to be applicable in modern context. Their perceived sacred-



ness makes them timeless, and religious leaders engage with and draw from these texts.

While scriptures are black and white, their meanings consist of shades of grey. A literal and non-contextual reading may result in discrimination, unhealthy practices, and harmful behavior. Religious leaders require a hermeneutical competence: scriptural reasoning skills. Reading an old text in a word-by-word way instead of putting it in the context of the digital and globalized world of the 21st century can have stark consequences. Leaders need to actively build tolerance for ambiguity so as to be able to apply 'old' scripture in 'new' context within (post-) modern times.

"The Creator has given us a manual of instruction."

How does one read this manual? In interviews and discussions, religious leaders emphasize two possible methods. Some use scriptures as a set of rules that requires contextualization. For others, it acts rather as an orientation, inspiration and stimulation. Whether viewed as guidance or command, religious leaders need the ability to critically reflect on scriptures. They have to contextualize the text and religion more generally to transfer insights into leadership practice in a beneficial and applicable way. Metaphorically speaking, religion can act as a compass, but leaders require the skills to read it appropriately to not go astray.

"There is a necessity for a constant hermeneutical process to comprehend God's words in the present and to implement it in practice."

Exclusivity

Workshop participants mentioned that leaders, when acting upon their beliefs, may (falsely) claim exclusivity through religion of a collective 'us' versus 'them'. The danger is that such a way of thinking can result in social exclusivity. Religious leaders then recruit, support, and promote people only from religious in-groups. This creates frictions, inefficiencies, even wrongful behaviors – for instance towards certain minorities, members of other faiths, or atheists.

"It is very harmful for an organization, and wider society if religion becomes a dividing line for hiring, interacting, and supporting others."

While differences between various streams of ethics and religions exist, leaders should focus on developing an inclusive leadership approach to overcome this challenge. Otherwise, we end up living in religious and social silos. Referring to the Quranic expression that God has created peoples and tribes so that they may know one another (Quran, 49:13), a Muslim leader emphasized that diversity should be regarded as a bless-



ing. Another interviewee explained the role of leadership in this regard succinctly:

"A function of leadership is to provide cohesion."

Those with such an understanding practice inclusive rather than exclusive leadership. This view acknowledges and appreciates difference, pluralism, and diversity.

Claims to divine right

The fourth pitfall is that religious leaders may believe that their faith and their actions are sanctioned by a divine mandate. Such a view may result in leaders interacting with their surroundings in a de facto autocratic way.

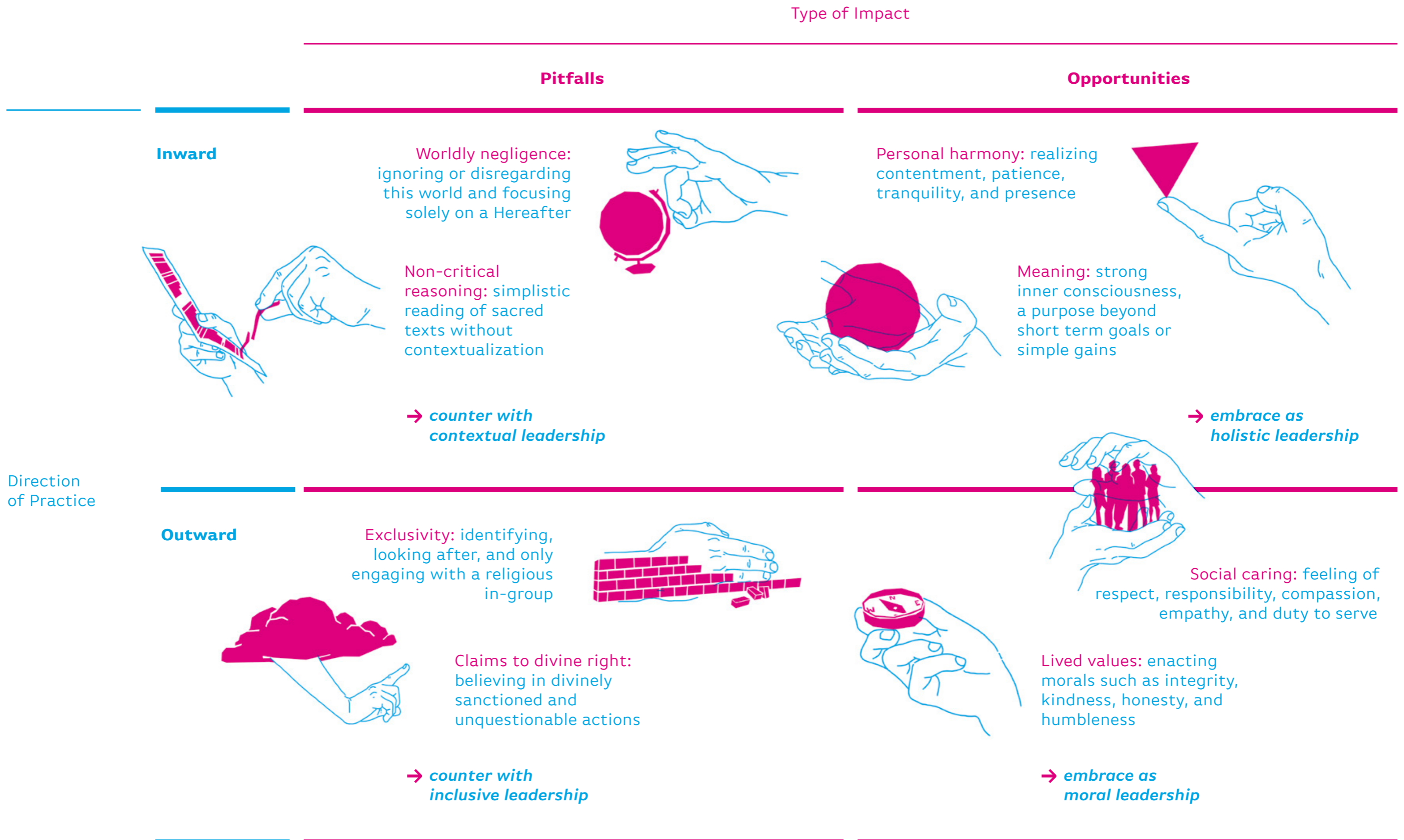
Interviewees mention that this causes aggressiveness, exploitation, and arrogance. This can manifest, for instance, in the belief that there is only one correct understanding of scripture and a divine and unquestionable right to lead. As an interviewee asserted, the result may be unfortunate:

"...little critical reflection due to the sentiment of a godly mandate."

This challenge can be overcome through a fundamental conceptual transformation: from divine right to divine responsibility. Such a divine responsibility should not impose nor coerce, but rather induce a desire to serve, support, and help. Organizations and societies can then channel a potentially harmful belief of a divine right into an inclusive principle of compassion and care.



Religion and leadership – pitfalls and opportunities



3. Opportunities

Religion can be a force for good. If leaders' beliefs are put in a contemporary context and practices are inclusive, they can benefit people, organizations, and society. Focused inward, religion may offer personal harmony and deeper meaning and through that holistic leadership. Focused outward, it can foster social caring and strengthen values, thus resulting in moral leadership behavior. Religious leaders should embrace these opportunities. Non-religious leaders should be aware of the potential their religious colleagues may bring to the table.

Personal harmony

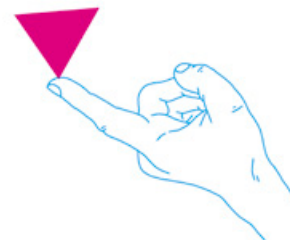
One CEO succinctly summarized her view as "Faith relieves". She continued by saying, "Hierarchy relieves followers, faith relieves leaders. This does not mean that I pay less attention but rather that I take things more seriously as a responsibility before God." Faith offers a feeling of contentment and comfort that counters the constant pressures of external demands. It deals with taboo topics such as death, illness and failure. Personal harmony thereby ensues in particular because it is not directly sought. Other interviewees formulated similar thoughts:

"God offers a safety net. You cannot fall deeper than into God's hand."

From our encounters with religious leaders, it appears that their beliefs translate into a certain level of equanimity, calm, and centeredness. This personal harmony of a leader can have a direct contagious effect on people around her.⁵ Research shows that in the light of paradoxes, leaders who show emotional composure outperform those who react with anxiety and defensiveness. In times of turmoil, constant change, swift decisions, and increasing complexity, these qualities become invaluable.

Deeper meaning

Religion can be a source of, and resource for, deeper meaning for leaders. It offers the possibility to redefine, frame, and continuously re-evaluate personal beliefs about the world and organizational aims within a wider purpose. While organizations may frequently define a narrow monetary and measurable purpose, religions ascribe their own meaning to human activity. Through it, leaders may strive for a more reflexive



5 See literature on emotional contagion: Cherulnik, Donley, Wiewel, & Miller (2001); Lewis (2000); Sy, Côté, & Saavedra (2005)

6 Smith & Lewis (2011)

mindset and holistic approach, which are crucial to finding strength and stability in complex, unstable, and ambiguous times.

While external factors push leaders increasingly to focus on short term goals, religious beliefs can help them keep long-term objectives in mind. Interviewees highlighted that religion puts profit into perspective.

"I have a stronger reflective capacity about what one should or should not do. An example is short-term profit maximization. Religion gives me elements of longevity."

Reflexivity is essential for both religion and leadership. One leader noted, "Your religious development never ends." This is likewise true for leadership. In that sense, both faith and leadership are not simply about a state of being, but rather a constant struggle of becoming.

Social caring

At a collective level, religious leaders will feel particularly morally obliged to care about all stakeholders and advocate for more sustainable behavior and solutions. Our interviewees stressed that their religion tells them to serve while leading. One manager stated that "to recognize humans as relationship beings, (...) not as self-contained – because you lead through relationships." Through an ethics of care, religious leaders may build strong relationships independent of their potential instrumental interests or their followers' beliefs.

"In business life my counterpart is 'thy neighbor' and I have the responsibility to love him – not more but also not less than myself."

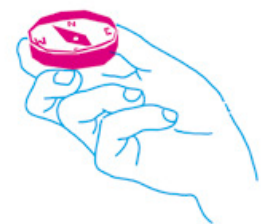
Various Christian interviewees stressed the commandments of loving thyself as well as thy neighbor. This love for others is linked to service. In the Gospel of Luke 22:26, Jesus advises his apostles that a leader should be like a servant. At an organizational level, companies are conceived as vehicles to serve society.

"Everyone who owns a business is a servant of society. We have detached ourselves from this understanding of business. A business has a task to serve society. It is not an end in itself."

Religion can support this pursuit by breaking through categorical worldly dualisms such as leading versus serving, omnipotence versus powerlessness, freedom versus responsibility, individualism versus love. It may assist in strengthening the paradoxical blend of personal humility and professional will.

Lived values

The significance of values and a sense of duty were common themes in our conversations. Values are not static but grow in reflection, they produce tradeoffs and struggles. Religion facilitates contemplation around



values. This is essential to the common moral purposes of spiritual, authentic, and transformational leadership.⁷

Religious texts emphasize the significance of values. In the Torah and Old Testament, Moses is advised to select a successor with specific attributes: someone who fears God, is a person of truth and hates greed (Exodus, 18:21). In the Quran (12:55), Yusuf describes his leadership characteristics: "Indeed, I will be a knowing guardian." The emphasis is not only on competence (knowing) but also on the right intentions (guardianship).

An interviewee stressed that religion shapes his sense of integrity. He told a story that his boss once asked him to lie to his clients and that he responded by saying he could not do so due to his religious convictions. In fact, his faith, he asserts, offers him a reputation of integrity.

"My colleagues know that I am a Christian. I think, this is my USP (Unique Selling Proposition). Colleagues and customers trust me."

Leaders frequently surround themselves with like-minded people of similar status. Contemporary leaders are often accused of keeping to themselves. Such a social bubble can create arrogance and cause leaders to lose touch with reality. Religious communities can offer counter-spaces. Also, one interviewee stated that Jesus as a role model did exactly the opposite. As a humble person he engaged primarily not with leaders but with the poor, the sick, the weak, and the old.

"The whole New Testament is not filled with how Jesus cared for the rulers and leaders of that time but with how he approached humans who were excluded, sick, and oppressed."

7 Brown & Treviño (2006)

4. Conclusion: Engaging with religion and moving forward

Religion has extensive reach and intensive power. Too often it is treated with a disdainful disregard. Instead of keeping our distance, we should critically and constructively engage with its impact on leadership.

Five ways to engage with religion

1. Take religion seriously

Religion shapes the core of personal beliefs and values of many as well as their understanding of social relationships. Yet, it is too often ignored. Instead, we should more actively and constructively engage with it. This does not imply an uncritical rapprochement. On the contrary, it means acknowledging religion as a social fact with a strong impact on many lives and on wider society. It follows that religion needs to be taken seriously, both as a source for good and bad, and dealt with accordingly.

2. Harness the power of religion, be wary of its downsides

Our study has shown that religion is a double-edged sword. On the one hand, it may cause threats to social order through negligence of this world, non-critical reasoning, exclusivity, and claims to divine right. On the other hand, it offers opportunities for social cohesion through personal harmony, meaning, social caring, and values. Both pitfalls and opportunities are potential, not necessary, outcomes of the belief in a religious faith. Leaders need to engage with them to push towards contextual, inclusive, holistic, and moral leadership behavior.

3. If religious, find personal and social balance

Leaders face an increased intensity, extensity, and velocity of interconnected demands. Religion can be an anchor for stability and guidance as well as a compass to navigate through, and deal with, ambiguity and uncertainty in this complex and ever-changing world. This can create a personal mindset and 'soulset' – empowering leaders' personal and social conduct. In difficult times, they may require professional spiritual counseling and coaching. Religion can have a significant positive impact on the formation of balanced leaders, balanced relationships, and a balanced society.

4. Put religion on the diversity agenda

Our interviewees strongly encourage that religion becomes a topic on the diversity agenda. They describe their environment as "aggressively

secular". This makes the inclusion of faith groups particularly difficult. Many wish to blend their professional occupations with their personal values. For them work and worship synthesize into wor(k)ship.⁸ While religion may sometimes be less visible than gender or race (with notable exceptions like a cross or a headscarf), it requires attention and engagement for the development of an inclusive organization.

5. Offer room for faith

Organizations need to consider how to literally and metaphorically offer room for faith. To support personal harmony for those interested in faith and spirituality organizations can offer an inclusive culture, spaces for contemplation, time for spiritual retreats, and support for spiritual development. All this should enable and encourage, but not coerce or pressure, personal balance and social harmony – and thus holistic leadership behavior.

Moving forward

Modern societies are challenged to identify and support values that both create and encourage individual harmony and social caring. However, materialism, individualism, and market dominance have overcrowded spiritual development and holism as well as social relationships of mutuality, caring, and community. Is this the time for renewed ancient wisdom? Religion can offer a potential counter-balance – while also having certain pitfalls. No matter how we value and evaluate it, religion and its impact on leaders is a social fact and hence a key element in modern leadership.

The question for leaders and their surroundings is thus not whether or not to acknowledge religion's role in leadership; it is their task to conceptualize and enact it as a force for good.

8 Gümüşay (2015)

Annex

Methodology

The 18-month study is based on an extensive literature screening and theorization that lead to the conceptual paper “The Impact of Distinct Attributes of Abrahamic Religions on Leadership Theory” (Gümüşay, 2016), which was accepted and presented at the 2016 Academy of Management Meeting.

The study builds on 32 semi-structured interviews with religious leaders of secular organizations and a half-day workshop. The geographic focus for data collection was Germany. Interviews were conducted between August 2015 and January 2016. We interviewed, for instance, a city mayor, a member of the national parliament of Germany, multiple CEOs, and heads of public institutions. During an exclusive workshop in May 2016 at LEAD, we also engaged with 15 carefully selected leaders with Jewish, Christian and Islamic backgrounds from diverse sectors such as business, politics, and civil society. This allowed us to gain insight through both individual exchanges and critical group discourses and to triangulate our findings.

About the author



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9 Gümüşay (2016)

10 While many of our findings are generalizable to other faiths, our main data focus is on the so-called Abrahamic religions Judaism, Christianity, and Islam.

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About LEAD

LEAD is a social business with non-profit status located in the heart of Berlin. We support leaders from the non-profit, business, academic, and political sectors in assuming leadership for the public good. At LEAD we believe a new leadership paradigm is needed: Future Leaders need to go beyond the mere interests of their organization or their individual career. They need to build bridges, empower others, think long-term, and care for the public good. Our executive programs explore the relevant competencies and mindsets needed to thrive as a leader in the digital age. Our think tank LEAD Ideas offers fresh insights into how the nature of leadership is changing in our complex and dynamic world – based on empirical analysis conducted with prominent academic partners. We share our deep leadership expertise through consulting engagements.

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