

Prophet and Servant: Locating Robert K. Greenleaf's Counter-Spirituality of Servant Leadership

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The current global turn to spirituality coincides with the emergence of values-based approaches in leadership. Robert K. Greenleaf's concept of servant leadership embodies this renewed focus on values, virtues, and followers evident in contemporary theories and models of leading. The spirituality of servant leadership is best described from Greenleaf's Quaker Christian faith tradition and falls in the domain of marginal counter-spirituality. Greenleaf describes servant leaders as prophets that act in dynamic systems of double loyalty that facilitates individual and societal transformation to usher in a new era marked by radical mutuality that is expressed in service.

I see our society as urgently in need of strengthening. Awareness of the pervasive alienation among contemporary young people in our country suggests that nurturing the human spirit could become a unifying idea. With all the diversity of religious beliefs and non-beliefs, there is a chance that substantial consensus could be achieved in searching for a basis for this unifying idea in our history and myth. (Greenleaf, 1996e, p. 44)

Contemporary public discourse and scholarly interests have been marked by an increasing interest in the phenomena of spirituality (Kourie, 2006) and this interest has reached the fields of business, economics, commerce, and leadership studies (Singh-Sengupta, 2007). This current turn to spirituality coincides with the emergence of alternative, post-industrial, and global paradigms of leadership where leadership is re-imagined as acts of virtue in community and mutuality rather than the strivings of power and prestige by one privileged individual (Bekker, 2008a). This paradigm shift from extreme individualism to perspectives in communal leadership is a global phenomenon and is contrasted by the individualistic, competitive leadership approaches of the past. "We finally begun to reexamine more critically our traditional concept of

leadership. It is based on an outmoded ego ideal glorifying the competitive, combative, controlling, creative, aggressive, self-reliant individualists” (Lipmen-Blumen, 1996, p. 2).

No other virtues-based theory of leadership embodies this global shift in leadership perspective and application more than Robert K. Greenleaf’s concept of servant leadership (Van Dierendonck & Heeren, 2006). This article seeks to explore the emerging nature of this shift in leadership philosophy by locating the spirituality of Greenleaf’s concept of servant leadership, using Kees Waaijman’s (2006) matrix for spirituality research in the reading of selected samples of Greenleaf’s religious writings on leadership (Fraker & Spears, 1996).

The Current Turn to Spirituality

Kourie (2006) proposed three broad reasons for the current turn to spirituality: (a) a shift from mono-cultural communities to multicultural, polycentric societies that is marked with a determined move from divergence to convergence; (b) a growing dissatisfaction with established forms of spirituality that finds its expression in deep spiritual hunger and a desire for existential meaning; and lastly, (c) a Gestalt shift in the rise of postmodernism that rejects the extreme individualism, secularism, materialism, and nihilism of modernity. These reasons all correspond with the emergence of values-based approaches to leadership theory and practice, such as servant leadership (Lipmen-Blumen, 1996).

As noted above, this turn to spirituality comes at the same time as greater emphasis is placed on the role of values and virtue in business, commerce, personal economic decisions, and leadership (Klenke, 2007). Schwartz (1992) highlighted the transformative aspect of values when defining them as “desirable states, objects, goals, or behaviors transcending specific situations and applies normative standards to judge and to choose among alternative modes of behavior” (p. 2). Servant leadership has become a model philosophy of choice for those leadership scholars and practitioners that have most identified with the global shift towards spirit and values (Block, 2006). Defining spirituality in leadership studies has not been without its own problems. The definitions have been numerous and at times conflicting. Fields (2007) reported that spirituality within the leadership literature is described as: (a) an inner experience; (b) expressing desires to find meaning and purpose in our lives; (c) a process of living out one’s set of deeply held personal values; (d) the basic feeling being connected with one’s complete self; (e) an internal value, belief, attitude, or emotion that effects people’s behavior; (f) a sense of transcendence, calling, or being called; (g) creativity, insight, openness, and extraordinary performance; and (h) a spiritual union with any and everything. One way to move towards an erudite and workable description of spirituality in leadership is to include the contributions of contemporary research in the theological field of spirituality, a sub-set of the discipline of moral theology.

Contributions from Contemporary Theological Research in Spirituality

Contemporary theological research in spirituality, characterized by multi-disciplinary, post-patriarchal, telluric, and post-structuralist approaches, locates the phenomena of “spirit” in the ontology of values (Kourie, 2006). Thus defined, spirituality is seen as the “ultimate” or “inner” values that provide meaning in life. This broad, defining approach provides a platform for scholars to examine a wide variety of spiritualities, ranging from religious to secular orientations. This trend in theological research of spirituality is thus no longer limited to

religious contexts and has also been observed in the fields of business, commerce, and leadership studies (Winston, 2007). The current approaches in spirituality research advocate a “dialogical-phenomenological” research approach making use of the analytical, hermeneutic, mystagogic, form-descriptive, and systematic tools of theology, sociology, and psychology (Kourie). This is a rich ground to explore the spiritualities that motivate, energize, and sustain the phenomena of values-based approaches to leadership, such as servant leadership.

Current phenomenological investigations in spirituality research distinguish three basic forms of spirituality (Waaijman, 2006): (a) established schools of spirituality, (b) primordial spiritualities, and (c) counter-spirituality. Descriptions of *established schools of spirituality* (Waaijman, 2002) describe movements that have its origin in specific historical and socio-cultural settings that over time give rise to discernable schools or ways of the “spirit.” Research of these established schools/ways are marked by investigations of the source-experience, the formation of pedagogical systems, the socio-historical context, the emergence of a value system, the formation of the consistent whole, and accessibility of others to the school/way. *Primordial spirituality* research (Waaijman, 2002) attempts to locate spiritualities that are not closely connected with any school or way, but imbedded in ordinary human experiences such as birth, marriage, having children, experiencing death, and suffering. Investigations in primordial spiritualities center around descriptions of everyday spirituality developed in the context of community, forms of indigenous spiritualities, and aspects of secular spirituality. *Counter movements in spirituality* (Waaijman, 2002) describe approaches that offer alternate solutions to existing social and religious power structures and the research in these fields follows descriptions of systems of liminality, inferiority, and marginality.

This article briefly discusses Waaijman’s (2002, 2006) matrix for the study of spirituality and then utilizes this matrix to explore and locate the spirituality of servant leadership in selected examples of Greenleaf’s writings on religious leadership.

Established Schools of Spirituality

Established schools of spirituality involves a “historical syntheses” (Waaijman, 2002), often guided by hermeneutic research, that describes progressive spiritual movements (see Figure 1) that find its origin in a source-experience, around which a group disciples are gathered within a specific historic, cultural, and social context. These movements often open new ways of thinking about the past, present, and future. In time the movements are structured into an “organic whole” (Waaijman, 2002, p. 118) in order that a larger group of people can have access to the source-experience and new perspectives in thinking. As the movements grow through successive generations access to the source-experience are sometimes blocked and thus a reformation of sorts becomes necessary.

1. A source experience that gives birth to a spiritual way.
2. An inner circle of pupils takes shape around the spiritual way.
3. The spiritual way is situated within a specific socio-cultural context.
4. The spiritual way opens a new, specific perspective on the future.
5. A second generation structures the spiritual way into an organic whole.
6. The spiritual way is shared with many people.
7. When the source experience, the contextual relevance and the power to open the future are blocked, a reformation is needed.

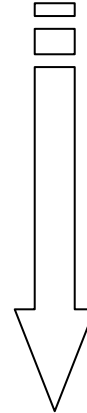


Figure 1. Waaijman's progressive process description of established schools of spirituality.¹

Examples of research in established schools of spirituality range from early Egyptian Christian Monasticism (Bekker, 2008a) to the efforts of contemporary Christian renewal communities in the West (Waaijman, 2002). Even though Greenleaf's concept of servant leadership bridged many religious communities and found a home in a wide-variety of established schools of religious thought, it is not evident that Greenleaf credited his concept of leadership as service exclusively to the philosophies and values of what can be termed established schools of spirituality.

Primordial Spirituality

There are forms of spirituality that do not belong to well-established schools of theological and philosophical reflection but are rather connected with the lived experience, as Waaijman (2006) noted:

They are closely related to life as it is directly lived, connected with realities such as birth, education, house, work, suffering, death. Of course, schools try to integrate this primordial spirituality, but by doing that, they admit that the primordial spirituality is originally independent, earlier than the school. (p. 6)

A synchronic study, mostly guided by descriptive research, of primordial spiritualities (sometimes referred to as "native" spiritualities and often takes on a laical form) identified three universal characteristics (Waaijman, 2002): (a) a strong bond with the environment, mediated through the community; (b) the centrality of community that is structured around familial

¹ From "The turn to spirituality and downshifting" by C. J. Bekker, 2008, in F. Gandolfi & H. Cherrier (Eds.), *Downshifting: A Theoretical and Practical Approach to Living a Simple Life* (pp. 102-121). Hyderabad: ICFAI Press. Copyright 2008 by ICFAI Press.

relationships; and finally, (c) a personal life framed by birth and death, which connects with the community through service, love, and care.

One such example of a primordial or native spirituality is the Southern African social philosophy of *ubuntu* (Bekker, 2008a). The South African Nguni word *ubuntu*, from the aphorism, “*Umuntu Ngumuntu Ngabantu*—A person is a person because/through others,” can be described as the capacity in African culture to express compassion, reciprocity, solidarity, dignity, humanity, and mutuality in the interest of building and maintaining communities with justice and mutual caring. More than a descriptor of African values, *ubuntu* should be seen as a social philosophy and a spirituality that is deeply embedded in African culture (Nama & Swartz, 2002). Mnyaka and Motlhabi (2005) described *ubuntu* as the primary foundation of a South African religious worldview. The connection between primordial spiritualities such as *ubuntu* and Greenleaf’s concept of servant leadership has been explored (Ramsey, 2006) but there is little in Greenleaf’s own writings that ascribes his concepts and insights to the values of spiritualities that are deeply rooted in the lived experienced of nature and the ordinary cycles of life.

Counter-Movement of Spirituality

The phenomena of spiritual counter-movements is explored by Waaijman (2002) using the anthropological “structure-antistructure” matrix of Victor Turner’s (1969) work in exploring the role of ritual in the formation and function of religious communities. Waaijman, guided by the principles of systematic and mystagogic research, explained Turner’s matrix of anthropological processes that religious communities use to express their values and beliefs, and in turn pointed to the importance of this construct in the study of counter-movements of spirituality:

By structure he [Turner] means a coherent whole of social roles and positions which functions in accordance with legitimated norms and sanctions. Anti-structure is the area outside of this: fruitful chaos, a place of incubation for new ideas and lifestyles, of resistance and creativity. Turner distinguishes three forms of anti-structure: liminality, inferiority, and marginality. This three-part division can help us explore the field of spiritual counter-movements. (p. 224)

Waaijman (2002) further built on the three-part division of Turner’s (1969) matrix of cultural processes to describe three forms of counter-movements of spirituality (see Table 1).

Greenleaf’s concept of leader as servant falls into this counter approach in spirituality. In an unpublished and undated document archived at the Greenleaf Center, entitled “The Primacy of Visions” (Fraker & Spears, 1996), Robert Greenleaf described the sources of his concept of and efforts to promote servant leadership:

Five ideas seem to me to have shaped the course of my life work. They were the servant model of my father in my early years; the advice of my professor to get into a large institution, stay there, and become a meliorative force; at age twenty-five, beginning to read E.B. White, sensing his great art of seeing things whole, and learning to practice that art; the advice of Elmer Davis at age forty to begin to prepare for a useful old age; and at age sixty-five reading Hermann Hesse’s *Journey to the East* and seeing the vivid dramatization of the servant as leader. These ideas sustained me in my work from youth onward and have had increasing force as I have grown older. (p. 43)

Table 1: Waaijman's (2002) Three Forms of Spiritual Counter-Movements

Types of spiritual counter-movements	Description
Liminal spirituality	Liminality is marked by being outside of the social structure in a state of indeterminacy. Liminal spiritualities are developed outside the standard structures of religious traditions and institutions.
"Inferior" spirituality	"Inferiority" is the transient or permanent position of those who find themselves on the underside of the social order, on the lowest rank of the social strata. "Inferior" spiritualities are cultivated by those that find themselves on the lowest ranks of society in positions of severe discrimination and disadvantage.
Marginal spirituality	Marginality is a position marked by double loyalty. Marginal spiritualities are constructed by those that stand on the margins of two opposing or differing social/religious/philosophical contexts.

In this excerpt from the above-mentioned unpublished document, Greenleaf (as cited in Fraker & Spears, 1996) identifies five "ideas" that shaped his life-long quest to define leaders as servants: (a) the model of paternal service; (b) the value of employment stability as a source of organizational transformation; (c) the integrative worldview philosophies of the children's books author E. B. White (author of the books *Stuart Little* and *Charlotte's Web*); (d) the belief in the communal value and service of older persons; and (e) the theosophy inspired philosophies of Herman Hesse, chiefly in *Journey to East*, a book that came to embody the values of the countercultural "hippie" movement of the 1960s. All five of Greenleaf's source-"ideas" in one or more ways describe a counter-cultural approach to life and society that has at its core values that promote personal and communal transformation. This is in step with Greenleaf's own faith tradition, that of Quakerism. The Christian witness and spirituality of George Fox and the Quaker movement has been described as that of a counter-movement of spirituality (Bekker, 2008b). Greenleaf himself described the spirituality of Fox and the early Quakers as one of counteraction, ethical regeneration, societal reformation, and organizational transformation, thus a good example of a counter-movement of spirituality (Greenleaf, 1996b):

What made George Fox's service to seekers (and their response to him) so exemplary was the significant move to new and more exacting ethical standards, the force of which carries to this day. Fox's major contribution was not his theology, nor even his encouragement to care for suffering—important as these were. Rather, it seems to me, what gave durability to the Quaker tradition was the practical result that so many of those who called themselves Friends behaved more lovingly toward all creatures and assumed an impressive level of responsibility for their society and its institutions. Perhaps the most innovative result was that, by the effort of those whom Fox inspired, the quality of some contemporary institutions, notably commerce, was markedly improved. (p. 299)

It is this countercultural aspect of Greenleaf's vision of servant leadership to assist scholars to locate his spirituality within the domain of a counter-movement.

Greenleaf's Vision of Spirit and Servant Leadership

Robert K. Greenleaf (1904-1990), generally credited as the one who coined the phrase and concept of "leader as servant" (Lee & Zemke, 1993), spent most of his professional career as the director of management research at the telecommunication giant, AT&T. It is in this context that Greenleaf sought to persuade organizational leaders to look within themselves and in response to the resident "inner strength of the spirit" adopt a servant posture in their leading (Quay, 1997). The litmus test of this alternative approach to leading would be the degree to which those being led were positively transformed by the leader-follower interaction (Greenleaf, 1996c):

The premise here is that of a servant-leader: those being served grow as persons; while being served, they become healthier, wiser, freer, more autonomous, more likely themselves to become servants. The least privileged person in society will either benefit, or, at least, not be further deprived. No one will knowingly be hurt, directly or indirectly. (p. 40)

Greenleaf's surprising message and ideological position, considering the organizational culture and ideologies of his time, can best be explained by placing it within the domain of marginal counter-spirituality. Marginal spirituality is a position marked by a double loyalty. Waaijman (2002) noted that "on the one hand, marginals belong to a given prestigious group in society. That is where they live; that is where their chances of advancement are located; that is their frame of reference. On the other hand, they are connected by their origin with groups on the outside, or on the underside, of society" (p. 215). Greenleaf's double position and loyalty of serving as a director within AT&T and speaking for those in lower positions of employment within the organization, provided him with the context to embody a spirituality that is quietly subversive in its quest for leadership and organizational transformation. Quay (1997), in commenting on the "revolutionary nature" of this double loyalty, correctly identified Greenleaf as a "Don Quixote trying to convince managers to pursue good and eschew evil" (p. 84). This revolutionary aspect of Greenleaf's work is in step with his own faith tradition, a Christian social counter-movement going back to the reforms of George Fox. Fox (1624-1691), a layman, started a counter-movement (later known as the Quakers) centered in the belief that a new age of the Spirit has come and that the ultimate guide of faith was the indwelling presence of the Spirit of Jesus (Bekker, 2008a). Fox encouraged a revolutionary approach to simple and radical ethical living based on the guidance of the Spirit that dwells within. Greenleaf (1996d) built on the tenets of this counter-spirituality in defining the nature of spirit, "I would prefer to say that spirit is the animating force that disposes one to be a servant of others" (p. 5).

The Servant Leader as Prophet

One of the clearest descriptions of Greenleaf's counter-spirituality of service lies in the use of the designation of prophet to describe servant leaders (Greenleaf, 1996c), "One is at once, in every moment of time, historian, contemporary analyst, and prophet—not three separate roles. This is what the practicing leader is, every day of his life" (p. 15). The leader as prophet is a

designation that has been defined and explored in scholarly descriptions of religious leadership. It is surprising, that with the relative increase in scholarly focus on the phenomena of leadership, to see how the leadership scholars in modernity have largely ignored the topic of religious leadership (McClymond, 2001). There has been little advance in theoretical perspectives in the processes of religious leadership in the 20th century (Lindt, 1986) beyond the pioneering sociological studies of Max Weber (*Economy and Society*, first published in 1922) and Joachim Wach (1944). Weber, Wach, and McClymond all described the prophetic role of religious leaders. Weber (1968) defined the prophet as “a purely individual bearer of charisma who by virtue of his mission proclaims a religious doctrine or divine commandment” (p. 46). McClymond (2001) went further and explained that a prophet is an “agent of change who takes personal responsibility for breaking with the established order, declaring this break to be morally legitimate and influencing others to follow his or her example in breaking away” (p. 622). Greenleaf’s vision of servant leaders as prophets embodies this counter-cultural approach of morality and organizational transformation and sought to influence others with his “subversive” message of servant-leading. Quay (1997) rightfully noted, “Greenleaf was more than a moralist, he was an evangelist. He preached to managers about how things might be in an utopian world, and how they might become servant leaders in such a world” (p. 84).

The designation of servant leaders as prophets is most evident in Greenleaf’s religious writings. An analysis of the use of this designation in four such religious writings serves to illustrate Greenleaf’s vision of servant leaders as prophets (Fraker & Spears, 1996), ideas that repeated in the rest of his religious and other writings:

1. “Religious Leaders as Seekers and Servants” (Greenleaf, 1996c).
2. “An Opportunity for a Powerful New Religious Influence” (Greenleaf, 1996a).
3. “The Servant as Nurturer of the Human Spirit” (Greenleaf, 1996e).
4. “On Being a Seeker in the Late Twentieth Century” (Greenleaf, 1996b).

Table 2 illustrates Greenleaf’s descriptions of the nature and functions of the servant leader as prophet.

Greenleaf’s descriptions of servant leaders as prophets in this small sample of his religious writings clearly embody a counter-spirituality of marginality. For Greenleaf, servant leaders are prophets, characterized by (a) vision, (b) high ethical standards, (c) excellence, (d) persuasive powers, (e) rational thought, (f) prophetic imagination, (g) ordinariness, (h) being comfortable with paradox, (i) listening, and (j) transformative actions.

Greenleaf took these ideas further and described servant leaders leading as prophets by (a) healing, (b) persuading, (c) creating systems of thinking, (d) opening alternative avenues for work, (e) serving, (f) inspiring, (g) facilitating individual and societal transformation, (h) empowering followers, (i) uniting leaders and followers, (j) building bridges between organizations and communities, and (k) by ushering in a new era of servant leadership. The intended outcome of these prophetic servant leaders is to re-imagine and reshape the social domain of leaders and organizations.

Table 2: Greenleaf's Description of the Nature and Functions of the Servant Leader as Prophet

The servant leader as prophet is defined by:	The servant leader as prophet leads by:	Sample of Greenleaf's Religious Writing of Servant Leadership
Ideas and visions	Creating the means for healing	"Religious Leaders as Seekers and Servants"
Sufficient persuasive power	Bringing followers into an effective force	"Religious Leaders as Seekers and Servants"
Vision and penetrating insight	Persuading	"Religious Leaders as Seekers and Servants"
A seeker (listener) first	Bringing openness, aggressive searching, and good critical judgment to the organization	"Religious Leaders as Seekers and Servants"
Imagining a world what will later be proved	Allowing followers to move into the future	"Religious Leaders as Seekers and Servants"
The ethical quality of the vision	Facilitating individual and societal transformation	"An Opportunity for a Powerful New Religious Influence"
The response to the vision	Linking follower and leader	"An Opportunity for a Powerful New Religious Influence"
Being ordinary	Bringing societal transformation into all spheres of society	"An Opportunity for a Powerful New Religious Influence"
Functioning at a high level of excellence	Serving to inspire others to greater service	"An Opportunity for a Powerful New Religious Influence"
Bringing "dependable prophecy" of the future that comes from the whole spectrum of human ability	Uniting "little" people in remote places and "big" people in conspicuous places	"An Opportunity for a Powerful New Religious Influence"
Releasing "new efforts" of leadership and service	Ushering in a new era of leadership and service	"An Opportunity for a Powerful New Religious Influence"
Having an "intuitive sense of rightness"	Facilitating others to make ethical and "right choices"	"The Search and the Seeker"
Demonstrating an "at-homeness with paradox"	Setting followers at ease with paradox	"The Search and the Seeker"

The servant leader as prophet is defined by:	The servant leader as prophet leads by:	Sample of Greenleaf's Religious Writing of Servant Leadership
Demonstrating a "benevolent, kindly attitude toward linear rationality"	Sharing insights in rational ways and experiential truth	"The Search and the Seeker"
Growing in stature as "seekers"/listeners respond to the message	Serving the seeker/listener	"On Being a Seeker in the Late Twentieth Century"
Having ethical standards	Moving followers in more "exacting ethical standards"	"On Being a Seeker in the Late Twentieth Century"
Being "religious" (in the original semantic sense of the word "to bridge")	Building bridges to close "the separation between persons and the cosmos"	"On Being a Seeker in the Late Twentieth Century"

Concluding Thoughts

Robert K. Greenleaf's concepts of servant leadership and the leader as both servant and prophet can best be described as a form of counter-spirituality that expresses itself in a dynamic system of social marginality. Greenleaf's servant leader seeks to bridge the two opposing worlds of self-interested commerce and the altruistic philosophies of public service and social transformation. Greenleaf proposed that the servant leader is a prophet that facilitates the formation of a new vision that unites and transforms (both individually and societal). These leaders bridge the world of commerce and community and by doing so create new possibilities of wide-spread societal transformation that ushers in a new era of radical mutualism best expressed in service.

Greenleaf's vision of the servant leader as prophet is consistent with the prophetic and often subversive call in counter-spirituality that offers an alternative vision for individual and societal identity and organization. In a dynamic system of marginality (double-loyalty), Greenleaf imagined a new world where leaders are servants, and servants are prophets. Greenleaf's new world is marked by service, equality, unity, and new possibilities of radical altruism. Greenleaf invited leaders to become nurturers of the spirit and prophets that will influence their times as a constructive force.

"The Prophet . . . is one who imagines what will later be proved" (Greenleaf 1996c, p. 14).

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