

Top Five Qualities of a Successful Religious Leader

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Introduction

Leadership is not something that an individual inherits by birth. It is something that a person develops through being engaged with the society in which he /she lives. Individuals learn to become a leader by doing what other excellent leaders have done before them. Leadership qualities are some skilful and appreciative means individuals develop within themselves to guide or direct people towards success. Effective leadership helps a group, community, society or even nation during the time of peril. Good leadership always brings success to the followers and enables them to fulfil the mission they aim for. In certain community it's the leader who stands in the front and sets directions for the rest of people in the community. It is the duty of the leader to help the community to see what is ahead, how to visualize and achieve goals in life. Leaders encourage and inspire people to aim for something good and develop required skills in succeeding with the work successfully.

The historical records gives us enough clues to believe that without a good leader a group of human beings rapidly degenerates into argument and conflict, as different people see things in different ways and lean toward different solutions. It is the duty of a leader to bring group of people together to one single mission and solve problems in such situations and direct them in the same direction. It is also true that there are different types of leadership depending on the purpose of the community. The qualities of leaders also differ depending on the types of leadership. In this concise paper I will discuss the top five qualities of a spiritual / religious leader as I see them.

Top Five Qualities of a Religious Leader

Throughout history, if we pay out attention to the biographies of successful religious leaders, who have emerged in human society, it can be vividly noticed that all of these leaders carried something in common which were appreciated by the majority of the people. Now the question is 'what are these common things found among these successful religious leaders that were appreciated by the majority of people?'

These common characteristics, if we investigate properly, are some universal qualities that attract people towards them. There are many such qualities that a good leader possesses. Among those qualities the top five qualities, that I think are most important, will be discussed in detail. The top five qualities are,

1. Morality
2. Honesty
3. Tolerance / Patience
4. Proper use of Power

5. Equanimity

Morality

Moral values are the essential steps in building an individual's character and nature and the sum total of one's character and nature is what we all are as human beings. These moral principles are the basis that makes the distinction between human being and other creatures. In a way, morality is the foundation that lifted the human species above all other creatures. Moral values give us a sense of understanding things and enabling us to choose between what is right and what is wrong. Moral values save us from falling to the wrong path and drag us towards a better life. It is the moral principles that give us a guilty conscience when something wrong has been deliberately done. According to the online definition, morality is 'principles concerning the distinction between right and wrong or good and bad behaviour.'¹

There are different aspects of moral values and usually a person with high morality is the one who encourages and promotes humanity. Moral qualities are the inner compass that directs a person toward what is right and fair.

Only if a person has an inner moral compass can he or she be sure that leadership qualities will not turn to evil ends. Leaders with inner moral compass keep distance from any kind of immoral activity which is a sign of safety zone for the followers. Such leaders will not involve themselves in any kind of immoral activities and will not persuade the followers to take part in it. Instead they will always try to lead the people towards morality and they themselves always set examples by engaging with moral activities.

If we notice the lifestyle of great religious leaders in history we can see that all these leaders valued principles of morality. For examples, Buddha never did something against his own moral principles. People believe that Buddha was an enlightened being and as an enlightened being he had perfect knowledge on what is moral and what is not. Whatever activities were immoral according to his principle he never did it himself and advised all his disciples not to do so.

A good leader who has his own moral principles usually never does things against his own principles as it brings uncomfortable, remorseful and depressed feelings. Moral values are something that all people want to observe, but it is not an easy task. So when someone dedicates their time and effort in practicing these moral values the society respect him and try to follow him. Morality is something that a good religious leader should try to cultivate and develop within him.

¹ <https://www.google.com/#q=morality+definition>

Honesty

Honesty is being sincere, truthful, trustworthy, honourable, fair, genuine, and loyal with the community a leader often engages with. It is very essential for a leader to maintain honesty while leading group of people. It is a quality which most followers usually rely on while following a leader. Honesty is a bridge for a leader to build a trustworthy relationship between him and the followers. In other words, honesty is one of the foundational tools of a leader to build trust among his followers. A good leader always tries to keep a smooth relationship with the people he leads. Honesty is one such component that helps the leader to keep a smooth relationship with the followers.

Being honest with the community means keeping updates of all the work that a leader does with the followers. A good leader should not ask his followers to follow something which he himself cannot follow. In other words a leader should be honest with his own words and acts (yathavādi tathakāri- does what he says). He must be open to all the people in the group and must share all his experiences among the people in the group.

Whatever he can do he must admit and whatever things that he can't do also, and should not hide it from the people.

Good leaders are flawless in their character, known for their honesty and integrity. When a leader is honest to the followers he automatically evokes honesty in his followers. Buddha is the most prominent example for this category.

Buddha never hid anything from his disciples and he always advised his disciples to follow things which he himself followed and practised. A strong bond between followers and their leader can be built only when the leader is honest with his followers and guides them in the proper way. When there is a strong bond between followers and their leader then the community progresses rapidly and people of the community can trust each other easily.

Tolerance

It is not proper for a leader to be short tempered. A leader is someone who has to meet various types of people daily and all these people are not of same nature. So it is the duty of a leader to cultivate tolerance so that he can face different people and able to listen to different thoughts. It is very important for a leader to be tolerant and listen to the different ideas of the people he leads.

He must be able to keep a well balanced mind while listening to view which he might not agree with. A tolerant leader leads people to peaceful co-existence among different groups of people. He leads the community towards prosperity and wellbeing. When a leader shows his true tolerance towards his followers everyone in the community feels valued and respected. The tolerant nature helps a leader to accept who others are and to create a better understanding of others views, religions, cultures and ethnicity. As Wegela states in his 'The Courage to be Present'

An awakened patience (tolerance) is about being open to whatever we experience in the present moment. It is the practice of nonaggression. Nonaggression, as we have seen in our exploration of loving- kindness, is welcoming rather than rejecting....²

A true enlightened religious leader is someone who has tolerance for people of other faiths and respects their beliefs. Although one might not agree with others practice, he must not show any disrespect towards others beliefs. Being a leader of a community he also must guide his followers in the proper way so that the followers also develop the nature of tolerance towards others faith and beliefs. In this way, a good leader can form a better community of people with mature understanding.

Once a householder named Upali came to meet Buddha to discuss a certain fundamental doctrinal concept. He was sent to Buddha by his former teacher Nighathanata Putta with the intention of defeating Buddha in debate. But when Upali came and listened to Buddha's words his mind changed and he wanted to be a disciple of Buddha. After listening to the intention of Upali Buddha advised him not to make any quick decision out of respect for the Buddha, but to think further. Householder Upali was surprised hearing what Buddha said and told Buddha that if he wanted to be a disciple of any other teacher in India they would have welcomed him beating drums and all, but Buddha's response was something totally different. He became more devoted to Buddha and requested Buddha to accept him as disciple. Then Buddha asked him not to avoid or stop supporting his former teacher after becoming a disciple of Buddha. In this story we notice the power of tolerance toward others belief. When a leader is truly forbearing towards others belief more people get interested in him and respect him as true leader.

Proper use of Power

It is very important for a leader to know how to handle the power of one's own position. A leader who fails to handle his power properly is not a good leader at all.

One must not misuse or overuse the power of one's position. He should know the limit of his power and proper time and place to use the power. Observing the leaders of the present world we can notice that most of the time leaders misuse their power. This is because most of the leaders in our world today inhabit position for which they are not yet qualified. Here 'qualified' means having spirituality together with power. If a leader is empty of spirituality he doesn't know the value of power and a person who doesn't know the value of something has no knowledge of using it either.

Ven. Thich Nhat Hanh believes that the misuse of power happens, as believes, because as humans we naturally have some qualities that harm ourselves and other. These qualities are anger and craving and the root cause for the origin of these qualities is the ignorance. In order to make use of one's power skilfully, Ven. Thich Nhat Hanh says we must cut off all these bad qualities that are harmful. Most of all we must try to get rid of the ignorance that we have in our mind. He

² Wegela, Karen Kissel, *'Courage to be Present'*, Sambala Publications, Boston, 2009- P. 134

believes that one must master over one's behaviours in order to use the power in a proper way and make it fruitful.

The first virtue you need to use your power skilfully is the virtue of cutting off. Cutting off what? You cut off your anger, your craving and your ignorance. Another way of saying this is 'letting go.' You gradually transform your craving, anger, fear and delusion. If you don't have this kind of self-mastery, you can cause yourself and others great suffering, and people will not respect you.³

Equanimity

Equanimity refers to a perfect balance and unshakable state of mind that arise from the insight of a person. It is a quality that helps a person to keep calm while facing various circumstances in life. A leader with the quality of equanimity, no matter what he sees, hears smells etc with his sensory faculties; he always tries to maintain a balanced position of his mind. In other words, he always attempts to let go of negative judgments about what he experiences and replace them with an attitude of acceptance.

Looking into our daily life we can vividly notice how our mind constantly changes when we face various situations in life. When we face the eight vicissitudes of life, such as rise and fall, success and failure, loss and gain, honour and blame, we notice that it is very hard to maintain a balanced mind. We feel how our heart responds to all this happiness and sorrow, delight and despair, disappointment and satisfaction, hope and fear. These waves of emotion carry us up and fling us down.

But a leader should not let his mind carry away with all these emotional feelings rather he should always try to maintain a well balanced mind facing all these different experiences in life. He should not be excited when someone praise him or should not develop any pain when people blame him. A leader should not show any reaction for all these vicissitudes of life. He should not ill-treat the people who blame him and at the same time should not try to take sides of the people who praise him. It is very important for a leader to cultivate a mind that doesn't shake or flow with these kinds of emotions.

Conclusion

In the modern world it is not a difficult task to be a leader. But it is, indeed, a very difficult task to be a good spiritual leader. All these aforementioned qualities though they sound simple in reality it is very difficult to maintain them in a practical life. These are some advanced virtuous qualities which allow a leader to guide himself and others in the right way. A leader who develops these virtuous qualities will never fall from his position. People will appreciate him and will follow him with respect and high devotion. They will not have any evil thoughts against him

³ Hanh, Thich Nhat, 'The Art of Power' Harper One, New York, 2007 -P.34

and he will be loved by all the people in the community. The aroma of his qualities, unlike the fragrance of flower, will flow against the wind. People from all directions will admire his qualities and will accept him as a leader and follow his footsteps.

Bibliography

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