

Andrews University

Leadership Program

WHEN UNETHICAL RELIGIOUS TRADITIONS OVERTAKE LOVE AND
RIGHTEOUSNESS

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

Religion is a team sport, argues Haidt (2012). We grew up choosing favorite teams and competing with our friends and family members not only in sports, but also in our religions, comparing which denomination was better and why, which one had the truth or not and above all, which one was wrong and going to hell. There are several traditions (family traditions, country traditions, sports traditions, food traditions, etc.) that I hold dear to my heart, but I did not realize that many religious traditions are the reason why thousands if not millions of spiritual people do not engage in religious activities around the world anymore. Haidt (2012) throws the question for us to discuss in this paper; “Is God a Force for Good or Evil”? (p. 264)

Etymologically, the word religion comes from the Latin *Religare*, (to bind) and it was given by the Roman grammarian Servius, says Hoyt,(1912) and supported by Christian philosophers like Lactantius among others who also understood the word as bringing parts, people, elements together. Contemporary religions tend to send a message of Love, Unity, Peace and Hope. Other religious beliefs have carried entire civilizations in human history to grow and expand as well as conquer each other and kill in the name of the God or gods they worshipped. Moreover, religions as organizations who came together, have shaped the concept of leadership since it involves a system, followers, and a structure. Are these structures always spiritual or just a set of traditions? Some religious traditions that do not respect human life (equality) and moral foundations like Care,

Fairness, Loyalty, Authority and Sanctity (Haidt, 2012), are currently the concern of ethical leaders when it comes to the social and moral crisis we face in our world.

Spiritual vs. Religious Leadership

What is the difference between spiritual and religious leadership? According to Covrig, Ledesma & Gifford (2013), when it comes to the spiritual meaning of individuals and groups, certain orders like Magical, Mythical, Logical and Systemical favor the Transpersonal and Mystical concept of a higher power. In other words, spirituality is an authority and impact derived from living in sync with an upper resolution, says Pielstick (2005). Religion, in the other hand, seems more related with beliefs in deities (Covrig, Ledesma & Gifford, 2013), as well as traditions, customs, structures and practices derived from those beliefs. Religions appeal to social groups, not just individuals, many times ending in a close circle of social controls and reinforcements of traditions, doctrines and beliefs. Those who structure their worship and loyalty to respect for authority and sanctity out of Love, enjoy all the positive outcomes of religions and spirituality. Those who use it to justify their behaviors and accuse those who do not embrace ridiculous traditions end up ruining not only their lives but the lives of those around them. Example: Pharisees, genuinely convinced their fanatic lives were God's will and they were not. They were one of the few groups Jesus condemned publicly. As a spiritual and religious leader, (and for some even political leader), there are common overlapping factors going back to theocratic nations of the past. Moreover, beyond biblical sources, we have witnessed several of these leaders turning religious and spiritual messages into wars where many dictators and tyrants not only profited economically, but also gained power without a democratic process.

Religions Creating Violence instead of Love

Unfortunately, religion has probably caused more wars than any other factor, argues Kimball (2008). Right now apparently the base for terrorist attacks is religious ideologies from several groups who blame each other for what has been going on for centuries, going back to the crusades and even earlier, says Partner, (1997) in his book *God of Battles: Holy Wars of Christianity and Islam*. The early God of Israel in the Bible is defined as a God of war, who “like many Semitic war gods, summoned wind and storm, lightning and thunder among other Divine weapons to the aide of the people He protected” (Partner, 1997, p. XV). From those early stories of God using miracles in wars for the people of Israel to conquer and survive to the book of Revelation where John describes a final Holy war between good and evil, with supernatural forces colliding and causing destruction and death, we can say that religious writings in the Bible are linked to war and violence instead of peace and Love. Christ himself declared "I came not to bring peace, but to bring a sword" in Matthew 10:34.

Furthermore, other religions claim their gods told them to fight in their names and with their blessings. Entire civilizations based their decisions to go to war against their enemies based on rituals and what they interpreted was being told to them by their gods. Even today, for many Americans and other Europeans Christian countries who have suffered terrorists’ attacks in the last few months, as well as for Islamic countries, the war is real and it goes beyond understanding and logic besides religion and the keeping of millenarian traditions. There is also violence within some religions and denominations that do not want to allow women to have access to leadership positions, as well as equal pay for equal work.

Leading with Love and Righteousness as Spiritual Virtues Instead of Just Following Traditions

As a leader, I rather be a spiritual leader, according to what Covrig, Ledesma & Gifford (2013) describe as leaders and followers sharing the journey of life closely trying to serve each other. More important than structures, doctrines and traditions, the message and life of a loving servant leader is to me more transcendent than being a religious leader who is more concerned about keeping traditions without Love. More than the individualistic Official, Institutional and Hierarchical religious characteristics for a leader, I consider the group of believers as more responsible and effective for the success of any religion. But both of them, spiritual and religious leadership can be done at the same time, since nothing replaces knowledge and understanding of what is needed to be a good loving follower of Christ, combined with emotional intelligence and a lifestyle according to our Creator.

But how is it possible that “Too much Love will kill you”, said Brian May (Promane, 2009) in one of his songs about how we can become “the victim of our crimes” when love is misinterpreted? Much hurting has been done in the name of Love (Love for God, Love for the Country). Can Love really bring death, pain and suffering? We pursue Love for others in the Servant Leadership journey not only for religious and spiritual reasons, but mostly because we have been blessed and helped by other leaders who we admire and try to imitate.

When Religious Practices Conflict with Ethical Decisions

Some cultures still link religious practices with immoral and unethical behaviors (overeating, drinking, sexual rites, etc.). For them these are religious practices, for others

those are clear evidence of unethical behavior. If we use the Bible as a guide for how to follow religious behaviors without violating ethics, we need to summarize it to Loving God above all things, and loving each other as a proof of the presence of God's love in our hearts. I do not think religion should give a pass to unethical behaviors. We cannot say one thing and do the opposite on our daily actions, words and thoughts.

Limits to Religions

There are limits to religion. I grew up in Roman Catholic countries where religious leaders and powers took for centuries the natural resources of the countries they "evangelized" and did everything in their power to keep these nations poor and ignorant in order to be able to manipulate them politically and religiously in an easier way. Even European countries are still recovering from these disastrous political interventions on behalf of religion, slowing down progress, freedom, socio-economic development and what is worse, causing unlimited wars and crusades in order to keep the power. When it comes to the day to day limits, spiritual leaders, parents, teachers, coaches and mentors should strive to lead others to God but without legislating and forcing others to follow man made rules at any level. Dr. Covrig mentioned in the video that even though good ethical and spiritual behaviors are needed, the estate should not legislate them, and I strongly agree with that. Even when the law of the country goes against personal beliefs and we have to respect it, there are other religious freedoms that the government should not be able to mandate. I understand the Ten Commandments and other Bible advice as a user's manual on how to live happy, healthy and peaceful lives honoring God while respecting my neighbor. God has laws and a structure that defines universal order, however He also created free will for all of us. Why? I do not understand that mystery as

a father. Why give my children the chance of getting hurt and hurting others in the process? Why create something that eventually would turn into a malediction, a curse, a source of pain and death. Probably because of these questions and many others I need to understand true love even more in my journey as a person and in my leadership journey as a servant instrument for others.

How to Avoid Traditions from Overtaking Love and Righteousness

As we mentioned in the introduction, Haidt (2012) asks the question at the end of his chapter about religions being a team sport; is God a force for good or Evil? We found that based on what the Bible tells us, there has been a lot of killing and destruction done in the name of God, but we all probably understand it as “needed” or as a consequence for those who chose not to follow Him, or who had the misfortune of not being Jewish or baptized as Christians. Can religion become better than spirituality? Religion should turn people into unconditional altruists, says Haidt (2012). Even in his “not so spiritual” terms, he challenges our understanding about religion and spirituality, to consider which one is better.

Probably, when it comes to the utilitarian proposal, spirituality is better than religion. Spirituality does not seek to bless without pain, it involves a journey that may not be comfortable, but it does bring a greater good and a perfect end on earth. It is not just about “what’s in it for me”, it is a higher calling. However, spirituality alone may not be able to survive without religion and traditions. As we mentioned in the introduction, religion aims to **religare**, which means “to tie, to bind.” That is one of the goals of a good spiritual and religious leader, to bring people together. There is no leader without followers. Heidt (2012) argues that even those who do not openly believe in God and

expect to be left alone in their individual liberal beliefs and practices sooner or later need a parameter to establish what is good for society. Furthermore, as we mentioned in the introduction, he also describes the positive influence religion has brought on values like Care, Fairness, respect, sanctity, loyalty and authority (Covrig, Ledesma & Gifford, 2013). A life with no direction and order is destined to uncertainty and chaos. If freedom of thought was the answer, those in that world should not be confused, hopeless and lost, however the reality probes the contrary.

CHAPTER II

CONCLUSION

Love wins, God wins, says Galli, (2011) when writing about the important things we believe in as Christians who consider God a personal friend and a role model to follow in times of peace and in times of war. There is a heaven we want to go to, and our leadership goal is to become servants to others to show the kind of unconditional Agape Love Jesus showed when he walked among us.

We started considering religion a team sport (Haidt, 2012). It is the exact example of what I have experienced in my life with Sports Ministries as the call I feel to serve every day. Not just because of an Ethics Class or a paper that needed to be written. The core of a team sport is the same as the ideal of a religion, to religare, to bind, to bring each other together with a common goal. Love is the ingredient and yes, we need some traditions to be kept, like solidarity and a constant unselfish desire to serve something greater than ourselves. After all that is for Haidt (2012) the definition of morality, based on what it does for others. Religion is not just “a set of beliefs about supernatural agents” (p. 272). Religion through a lens of Love brings cooperation, caring about others, binding “ourselves into teams that can pursue large projects. That’s what religion is all about” (p. 273).

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