

MAKING OF RELIGIOUS LEADERS

Dr M.D. Thomas

Religion is that reality which gives meaning to life. ‘If one really wants to do anything in life, one should have a religion’, observed Bernard Shaw, a world genius thinker. He means to advocate the fact that ‘religion is the motivating factor in life; it is the source of strength for living one’s life.’ Subscribing to a system of beliefs and practices is not religion. The way one thinks, speaks and behaves is religion. Religion is the sum and substance of one’s experiences, attitudes and approaches. It is the foundational centre one’s commitments in life are tuned to. It is the vision, which one’s life-mission is grounded in. It is the power-house of one’s journey of life, too.

This perspective articulates ‘religion’ in its deeper implications and it goes beyond the limits of all theistic-atheistic and denominational affiliations. It includes all individuals and communities of the human society. In this sense, religion or faith is fundamental to human existence.

Leadership emerges from one’s religion or faith. A leader is someone who does the right thing when no one else does. To have right personal initiatives is the basic characteristic of a leader. Those who wait for someone else to set an example before they act are followers. Leaders create examples for making the type of society they want. It is not easy to be a leader, in the right sense of the word. He or she has to become a role model. He or she has to break new grounds. He or she has to travel a new path and be an evidence for the goal the path leads to. He or she has to be capable of facilitating others to tread the path pioneered. He or she has to make him or her available to others in loving service. It is one’s faith or religion, which makes one evolve with the mindset of a leader.

Religious leadership is an innate quality. Real leaders are born. Their leadership is a spontaneous overflow of what they are. Appointed leaders often lack the innate quality of leading the community. Most of them are short of initiatives. They tend to rule over the people. Ruling over others is no leadership at all. Genuine leadership is spiritual in its nature. A great fraction of rulers are weighed down by worldly ambitions. They prove their incapacity in leading the community towards moral and spiritual heights. To do the right thing, that too almost single-handedly, requires a moral base and a spiritual drive. The quality of leadership, may it be religious or general, is dependent on the quality of one’s faith, perspectives and convictions in life.

Religious leaders have to be broad-based in their attitudes. Leaders, may they be political, civil or religious, are inclined to claim the first position in the society. Most of them, even unknowingly, crave for importance. They are accustomed to priority and

privilege. Many of them suffer from a VIP-complex. As lawmakers, they consider themselves above the law. Traffic rules are made for everyone to follow. But, waiting for the traffic light to turn green is extremely embarrassing for the VIPs. Stopping the whole traffic in order to make way for their dignified movements seems to be their unquestionable right. Religious leaders normally seek divine sanction for similar reasons. Under the disguise of the will of God, fatalism, reward and punishment, many of them manage to fulfill even their worldly ambitions. In course of time, they tend to be autocratic in their ways of thinking and acting. The spiritual quality of their leadership in them dies and many of them end up as sheer rulers of the world. Therefore, it is necessary that their attitudes be broad-based and refined.

Religious leaders have to be democratic. We are citizens of the biggest democratic country in the world. Democracy upholds diversity. An authoritative system of making rules and making people follow contradicts democracy. That wouldn't be effective, either. The religious leaders have to evolve the policies and regulations in consultation with the followers of the respective community. They have to keep the welfare of the people and the society as the focal point of all the endeavours. Democratic leadership requires deeper commitment to the objectives of the country and to the human society. Religious leaders could be assisted in achieving this democratic process of leadership.

Religious leaders have to promote shared leadership among the people. 'Be the change you want to see', said Mahatma Gandhi. People should not wait for the leaders to first respect rules. Governance by people and not by government is the watchword of democracy. We must learn to self-govern. The rules we make to create order in the society are our common and shared property. Anyone who breaks these rules steals and destroys something precious that belongs to all. People could set an example, even for the non-practicing official leaders. All are responsible for improving the quality of human lives in the society. Well-meaning religious leaders and enlightened citizens have to stimulate such a shared leadership among the citizens. They have to live it themselves, too.

Religious leaders have to simplify their respective religious system. Most of the religious leaders entertain themselves with superlative titles, like holiness, param poojya, beatitude, mohataram, eminence, gajatguru, grace, sadguru, most reverend, shree-shree-shree, excellency, 108 and reverend. Religious leaders of all communities, though in more or less degrees, wear comic and even showy dresses, which are designed to command attention and respect from people. Many of them have highly luxurious habits, too. Some of them become even victims of an enlarged ego. It is sad to note that these ways do not in any way correspond to the spiritual authority they claim. Obviously, the religious dimension in them almost vanishes. Religious leaders have to make conscious efforts to be simple, genuine and spiritual in their life-style, lest they cease to be leaders as well as religious leaders.

Religious leaders should be people-oriented. Religious leaders are popularly understood as representations of God. Religious masters often assert their preferential position on account of the religious role they play. Many religious masters seem to aspire to become mini gods or to be considered almost equal to any deity. They become egoistic and make themselves the center of the devotion of their followers. They erect a religious system around them. Their devotees are carried away in emotions. Superstitions get deep-rooted. The leaders become the primary beneficiaries of the system. Corrupt practices get structured and people become enslaved to distortions. Religion and faith have to be oriented to liberating human persons towards divine realization.

Religious leaders have to fight evil in their respective communities. The world history has it that most of the wars and killings of the society have had religious causes. The communal riots and the consequent misery often have religious sanction or religious roots. Unsocial elements seem to carry religious banners. Lot of violations, encroachments and unbecoming behaviour appear to be protected by religious systems. Religious leaders are either responsible for some of them or have got callously indifferent towards them. To probe into such misshapeness in one's community and to do one's best to eliminate them is the primary duty of the religious leaders. Religious leaders who do not hold themselves responsible for such unfortunate situation in their own communities and do not fight an all-out campaign against such irregularities lose their moral right to continue as leaders of the respective community. Religious leaders have to be self-critical. They have to be honest with regard to updating the quality of their leadership. The world is looking up to their fitness. The quality of their leadership decides the relevance of religion itself. Will the religious leaders of all communities stand the test of the world today and sharpen the spiritual quality of their leadership?

Dr M.D. Thomas

Founder Director, Institute of Harmony and Peace Studies
Floor 1, A 128, Sector 19, Dwarka, New Delhi 110075

Tel.: 09810535378 (p), 08847925378 (p), 011-45575378 (o)
Email: mdthomas53@gmail.com (p), ihps2014@gmail.com (o)
Website: www.mdthomas.in (p), www.ihpsindia.org (o)

Twitter: <https://twitter.com/mdthomas53>
Facebook: <https://www.facebook.com/mdthomas53>
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