



Prophetic Leadership: One Among Many Roles or a Model for all Roles?

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Abstract

There is a need to see prophetic leadership not so much as one among the various leadership roles, but as a possible model or perspective to shape all such roles. It can be carried out with criticality and creativity, responding to the signs of the times, in the light of the experience of God's continuing involvement in personal and communitarian history. Authentic prophetic vocation too has several common dimensions across religious traditions. This fact becomes a good boost to understand and cultivate prophetic leadership in an interreligious *cultus*. Prophetic leadership in this sense can establish fruitful interreligious bonds geared towards a shared mission of facilitating God's redemptive activity in the here and now.

Keywords

Prophet, leader, model, prophetic and traditional leaders.

Many a time, the concept of 'leadership' is exclusively identified with hierarchy, administrative roles and such as other sub-themes of a much wider reality of

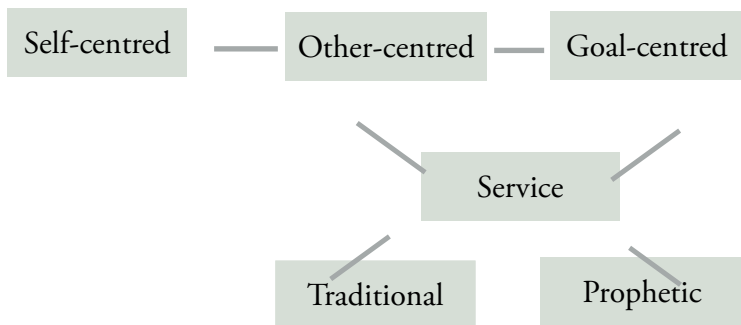
leadership as. However, leadership can be exercised without occupying an administrative role or a prominent place in a hierarchy. Administrative functions make merely one role and not the only role in leadership. In an interesting essay Lynn H. Cohick studies the metaphor of 'head' in the letter to the Ephesians in the context of its teaching on marriage. His conclusion is that the metaphor stands for 'responsibility' and 'service' rather than 'Authority-differential'. Evidently, these are some distinct roles in the exercise of leadership. Studies have shown that an effective leadership (and perhaps not necessarily a mere efficient administration) in the Churches has positive consequences for ministerial effectiveness. Leadership simply refers to a capacity to influence others' opinions, thinking, feeling, behaviour and life in its various aspects. In this sense, there are various leadership roles. This paper considers prophetic leadership not merely as one among them, but more profoundly as a model for all such roles and explores some of its significant contours.

Prophetic leadership

Mark Lau Branson speaks of three traits of leadership in general: a. *relational leadership*, whose main concern is to build up the group/ community by fostering relationships, thereby facilitating the sprouting of a group identity and a common mission; b. *implemental leadership*, which takes care of the structures and systems that are necessary to live out the identity and mission, and c. *interpretive leadership* that interprets the issues, events and texts of the community to bring out their meaning and significance for its life. Although prophetic leadership more specifically comes under the *interpretive leadership*, nevertheless the first two traits can be and need to be exercised in a prophetic manner. If one focuses on the functioning of *interpretive leadership* especially in the prophetic literature of the Old Testament, one notices a two-way process: the interpreted texts, to the extent they are lived by, shape the life of the communities and the result of such a living in turn influences the interpretation of the texts and their revised compositions.

In all these activities the prophetic leadership is called to be thoroughly rooted in the history of the community and on the other hand is entrusted with the responsibility of discerning the presence and activity of God in that very history. Lack of such discernment gives rise to false prophets, who steal the words from other prophets instead of receiving fresh ones (Jer 23:30) or utter their own words and deceive people rather than transmitting God's words (Jer 28), or interpret the events not according to God's will but according to personal convenience (Is 5:20; Jer 8:11).

Further, one can identify three attitudes of exercising leadership: a. self-centred, b. other-centred and c. goal-centred (the goal being neither the self nor another human person, but a distinctly third entity). In this classification the second and the third may at times overlap at least partially. These two point at an underlying attitude of service. Such attitudes can be practiced through two major modes such as *prophetic* (being critical and creative through words, deeds, exemplary presence, etc.) and *traditional* (carrying on the status quo). These two modes can be operative in any institution of public service, such as, bureaucracy, cults, pastoral service, judiciary, legislature etc. The entire classification can be schematically represented as follows:



In this paper I would like to delve deep into the prophetic style of exercising leadership in any given role or office and thereby its relevance for today in the Church. The

importance of prophetic leadership for today can be derived from its depiction in the OT. Incidentally, among the kingly, priestly and prophetic roles, the last has no parallel in the other ancient West Asian religious traditions. Although we can trace the existence of prophetic figures in such religions and cultures, their roles seem to be more of an ecstatic nature and hardly can be placed on par with kingly and priestly roles, as in the case of Ancient Israel.¹

Traditionally the Church recognizes three major roles in the leadership positions: **kingly** (the administrative/governance), **priestly** (spiritual animation and sanctification through the administration of sacraments, preaching etc.) and **prophetic** (being visionary by means of holding the past, present and the future in a mutually interactive way within an overarching perspective of divine providence). Correspondingly, four leadership aptitudes are identified. They are: “a directing leader, a strategic leader, a team-building leader...[and] an operational leader”.² It is difficult to find all these aptitudes in a single individual. Hence it is suggested that the best exercise of leadership emerges when a team of leaders with different aptitudes function together. What is important is to note that each of these can be exercised prophetically; since prophetic charisma can be functional in these.

In the tradition of the Church, the three said leadership roles are integrated within the ministerial priesthood.³ Such

¹ Bruce C. Birch, “Reclaiming Prophetic Leadership”, *Ex auditu*, 22, 2006, 14.

² G. Barna (interviewee), Shirley Freed (interviewer), “Leadership Issues for the Church”, *The Journal of Applied Christian Leadership*, 8 no 1 Spr 2014, 25.

³ Duane M. Covrig, Mordekai O. Ongo, and Janet Ledesma, “Integrating Four Types of Moral Leadership”, *The Journal of Applied Christian Leadership*, 6 no 1 Spr 2012, 45. In this article the Writers argue for a fourth role: ‘judge’ that integrates the king, priest and prophet. Although ‘judge’ was a distinct role in the pre-monarchical Israel, a critical reading of the article lays bare the fact that what the Writers call ‘judge’ is not really a distinct role, but an

integration does not amount to nullifying their specificities. More, in the exercise of their specific functions, each can be prophetic. Hence, there can be a prophetic way of governing, a prophetic way of celebrating liturgy and breaking the Word etc. In this sense the 'prophetic' can pervade the 'kingly' and 'priestly'. It's only by allowing for it, that a current tri-dimensional (priestly, kingly and prophetic) Catholic priest can effectively overcome the possibilities of becoming over-cultic, dogmatic, despotic, elitist and narcissistic in his ways of functioning. This however, does not mean that a prophet does not need to introspect. As charity, prophecy too should begin at home! Prophet Jonah is a classic case in point. He is eventually brought to follow the ways of the Lord.

One of the major concerns in religious/ Church leadership today is a tendency to blindly follow some leadership patterns prevalent in the political field, government, bureaucracy and even in the corporate world. There can be some useful elements to be learnt from such leadership styles, but they cannot be simply imitated uncritically, however efficient and attractive they may appear. This is for the simple reason that the leadership in the Church and especially a prophetic leadership has more than a mere efficiency in view, in so far as the Church is the servant of the Reign of God. Being servant of the Reign would mean being in certain definitive sense sacrament of the Reign, thereby embodying the Reign in a visible manner. For this, the leadership must be characterized by values such as holiness, steadfast love, justice, righteousness, faithfulness, integrity and compassion.⁴

Authority in the Church can be understood both as legitimate power and responsibility. In both the cases it belongs to the entire Church body (Eph 4:11-12). In a similar way obedience has two dimensions: listening (*akouein*)

ability of a leader for prudent judgment. Hence, I do not see it as a separate role.

⁴ Bruce C. Birch, op.cit., 11.

and submission (*hypoakouein*). All faithful need to listen to the Spirit residing and speaking in all of them, so that the submission is given primarily to the Spirit and concretely to those who are called to exercise the authority, who themselves are submissive to the Spirit present and active in all. In the Indian contexts where the presence and activity of the Spirit is recognized within and beyond the confines of the visible Church, an extra sensitivity is deemed necessary on the part of the Church. Such sensitivity cannot be reduced to a mere politeness and respect towards all, but needs to be expressed more importantly in a true spirit of discerning dialogue and a dialogical discernment with all people of goodwill, in recognizing and nurturing the possible gifts of the Spirit in them. There is no other more vivid realization of this dynamic than in the case of an authentic prophetic leadership. Having reflected on some of the general characteristics of prophetic leadership, we shall now consider some of its specific elements.

Characteristic traits of prophetic leadership

The source of prophetic leadership is an authentic encounter with the divine

A profound sense of being ‘sent’ in an encounter with God is intrinsic to prophetic leadership (Jer 1:10; Is 6:8f). The false prophets are not sent, they assume the office on their own (Jer 27:15; 28:15). These encounters and the divine message thereby received are contextual – shaped by the contexts and related to their exigencies as the signs of the times. They cannot be blindly repeated at all times and circumstances.⁵ This however does not mean that a prophetic leader is merely a product of his context. On the contrary,

⁵ For instance, it is an authentic prophecy by Isaiah when he says to Ahaz ‘don’t be afraid...it shall not come to pass’ (Is 7:4,7) – referring to the imminent invasion of Judah by Israel and Syria. However, the same prophecy repeated by prophet Hananiah in the context of the imminent attack by Nebuchadnezzar, the king of Babylon less than 200 years later becomes a false prophecy (cf. Jer 28:1f).

being shaped by the contextual concerns and simultaneously enabled by the divine grace, he/she sees a hitherto unnoticed dimension of the context with a prophet's eye (*divya chakshu*). In fact, "it is a basic requirement of the prophet to be able to see life from above the 'storm' as well as from below, to see with both the natural and the spiritual eyes, to see the fourth dimension of life as well as the three dimensions of sense reality—to see life wholly."⁶ The divine encounter brings in a profound transformation in the person of the prophetic leader. It is from this transformed interiority that he/she acts. It is truly a living 'from inside out'⁷, a living not from external compulsions, but from the profoundly interior exigencies of a transformed self.

Since the divine encounter is at the root of the prophetic leadership, the leader can rise above personal losses and gains, fixing his/her gaze on the *Missio Dei*, and seeing His plans even amid apparent chaos. "Even though you intended to do harm to me, God intended it for good" (Genesis 45:7-8; 50:20) says Joseph when he meets his brothers in Egypt. With such a consciousness a prophetic leader steers between *memory* (of the past deeds of God) and *vision* (of the future, based on God's promises).⁸ It is a process in which prophetic leaders respond to and weave together stories of divine interventions in the history of their people with day-to-day stories of their pain and suffering.⁹ Further, the memory that is cultivated is not about a static past, but of a continuing history. The stewardship of the prophetic leadership consists also in transmitting the so constituted memory to the future. It is such communal memory that constitutes and reconstitutes

⁶ Gene Rice, "Elijah's Requirement for Prophetic Leadership (2 Kings 2:1-18)", *The Journal of Religious Thought*, 59 - 60 no 1 - no 1 2006 - 2007, 10.

⁷ Timothy R. Puls, Laverne L. Ludden, and James Freemyer, *op.cit.*, 57.

⁸ Bruce C. Birch, *op.cit.*, 16.

⁹ Helene Slessarev-Jamir, "Prophetic Activism in an Age of Empire", *Political Theology*, 11 no 5 Oct 2010, 677.

the community and its self-understanding.¹⁰ The construction of such memory can take place through various means – liturgy, service of the Word, personal and communitarian faith-praxis etc. This results in the emergence of liberating sacred narratives and liturgies. Such liturgies can facilitate liberating encounters of the Divine for the participants. Seen from a prophetic perspective, such liturgies become source and substratum of theology, where, “the human pathos and God’s ethos encounter each other in a demanding claim for transformation with justice.”¹¹

In addition, the OT prophets also critique those cultic practices that are either expressions of blatant exploitation or are passive to the people’s pain. For instance: Amos 5:21-24; Hos 4:6; 6:6; Isa 1:12-17; Jer 6:20; 7; Mic3:11,12. A similar dynamic is found also in the NT (Jesus denounces empty rituals; Paul reprimands Corinthian community for their lack of concern for the poor at the Eucharistic celebration – 1 Cor 11:17f etc.). A prophetic way of celebrating the liturgy, therefore, has two important factors held together in tandem: it is thoroughly rooted in the life of the people and simultaneously so structured to facilitate an encounter with the Divine.

In fact, liturgy understood as ‘public works’ (Greek: *leitourgia*) has an intrinsic communitarian as well as a redemptive dimension in it. The word originally referred to the works done for the public at private cost; namely public service. However, in the Christian era it got restricted to religious sphere.¹² The redemptive dimension of liturgy can be attributed to the fact that liturgy is also something God

¹⁰ Ellen Bradshaw Aitken, “To Remember the Lord Jesus: Leadership and Memory in the New Testament, *Anglican Theological Review*, 91 no 1 Wint 2009, 40, 43.

¹¹ T. B. Junker, “Foundational Concepts for Prophetic Liturgical Praxis”, *Encounter*, 72 no 1 Spr 2011, 133-134.

¹² John E. Clentos, “Liturgical Perspectives on the Laity,” in Anton C. Vrame, ed., *One Calling in Christ: The Laity in the Orthodox Church* (Berkeley: Inter Orthodox Press, 2005) 107.

does among us and for us.¹³ In addition, liturgy is intended to touch the entire person of the participant. A ritual or a liturgy can lose its transformative potential by being too individualistic, naively pietistic, neglecting the participation of the whole person, or by ignoring to address the real-life issues etc. An authentic prophetic leadership critiques such situations and strives to make liturgy, truly public, integral and redemptive

Prophetic leadership reminds of the fact that God is a decisive agency in human history

In the OT, the prophets of Yahweh act as reminders of this fact in Israel's good as well as bad times. When the people take their chosen-ness by Yahweh for granted and forget to live according to this calling or prefer the kingship of a monarch to that of Yahweh (1 Sam 8:7), the prophetic word becomes active in terms of judgment against the people.¹⁴ On the other hand when people live in hopeless conditions of war, invasion, and exile the prophetic leadership is inspired to speak tenderly to the afflicted people to create new paradigms of hope and confidence (Is 7; 43; 49 etc.) and to project visions of a renewed life (Ezek 37). This dual vocation of prophetic leadership is well summarized in Jeremiah's call narrative: it is to "pluck up and to pull down, to destroy and to overthrow; to build and to plant" (Jer 1:10). In all these, prophetic leadership acts as the instrument of Divine agency.

The optimism of prophetic leadership is more remarkable than its critique. In fact, it is the hope that makes the critique positive and constructive. Hence, it is remarkable to note that the judgment of God given through the prophet is not a condemnation to Hades, but primarily salvific. And

¹³ Michael B. Aune, "Liturgy and Theology: Rethinking the Relationship: Part 2 A Different Starting Place", *Worship*, 81 no 2 Mar 2007, 147.

¹⁴ Walter Brueggemann, "Prophetic Leadership: Engagement in Counter-Imagination", *Journal of Religious Leadership*, 10 no 1 Spr 2011, 3.

so, even in the very act of predicting doom, the biblical prophets articulate hope for the future. The forsakenness is only for a short period of time, which will be followed by being gathered with great compassion and love (Is 54:7). No wonder then that a prophetic figure like Mahatma Gandhi, in fact is described as “prisoner of hope”¹⁵.

Today’s prophetic leadership needs to offer alternative visions for the present and the future that are geared towards plucking up, pulling down, destroying and overthrowing all that is contrary to the Reign of God and simultaneously build up and plant all that promotes such a Reign. It is in and through such a mission that prophetic leadership mediates God’s transforming agency in the human history. Indeed, Abraham Heshel is right in saying: “it is perhaps more proper to describe a prophetic passion as theomorphic than to regard the divine pathos as anthropomorphic.” And again, “God’s unconditional concern for justice is not an anthropomorphism. Rather, man’s concern for justice is a theomorphism”.¹⁶

Prophetic leadership exposes false labelling

A vicious tactic of vested interests of all times in history has been to indulge in mislabelling reality and thereby mislead people. OT prophets vociferously expose this phenomenon: “Ah (woe!) you who call evil good and good evil, who put darkness for light and light for darkness, who put bitter for sweet and sweet for bitter!” (Is 5:20). And again, “they have treated the wound of my people lightly, saying ‘peace, peace’ when there is no peace!” (Jer 8:11). In our own times we have labels such as ‘rogue states’ (those who do not fall in line with ‘our ways’), ‘axis of evil’ (those who oppose our tyranny), ‘global community’ (a few

¹⁵ Judith M. Brown, *Gandhi: Prisoner of Hope* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1989). Referred to in Peter M. Sensenig, “The Theorist, the Tactician, and the Translator: Faith-Based Peacemaking and Leadership”, *Journal of Religious Leadership*, 12 no 1 Spr 2013, 94.

¹⁶ A. Heshel, *The Prophets*, (New York and Evanston: Harper and Row, 1962), 260, 271-272.

powerful gang of nations), ‘development’ (luxury for a few by causing misery for millions), ‘freedom and democracy’ (enjoyed by a few at the cost of millions in socio-political slavery) and so on.

Here is an enlightening poem by Rev. Billy that exposes the denial tactics of euphemism:

Dear Lord,

We can't believe that bombing is called security.

We can't believe that monopoly is called democracy.

We can't believe that gasoline prices are called foreign policy...

We can't believe that racism is called crime fighting!

We can't believe that sweatshops are called efficiency!

We can't believe that a mall is called the neighbourhood!

We can't believe that advertising is called free speech!

We can't believe that love is called for sale!¹⁷

A prophetic leadership needs to expose these blatant lies and half-truths and liberate the truth from their stranglehold. Such expositions are needed for the hope to be realistic and not simply a delusion or an illusion.

Prophetic leadership strives to bridge ‘heaven’ with ‘earth’

An authentic prophetic leadership shuns separating ‘heaven’ from ‘earth’ and positively relates the two. A truly liberating religion and spirituality should be incarnated in daily life situations or else they will turn out to be mere opium. The vested interests in fact work meticulously towards such a delink if a religiosity or spirituality is seen to be a threat to their plans. On the contrary these interests

¹⁷ Bill Talen, *What Should I do if Reverend Billy is in My Store?* (New York: New Press, 2003), 93-94. Cited in Walter Brueggemann, *op.cit.*, 9.

also use religion for their purposes whenever it is feasible. A prophetic leadership foils such efforts by consciously striving towards developing truly incarnate spirituality, religiosity and liturgy, where within a broad eschatological vision day-to-day life-struggles and issues are addressed. In this sense “a prophetic theology paradigm is one which thinks and acts ‘theologically’ with critical cognizance of economic realities and in critical dialogue with the existential questions, needs and problems prevalent within the economic milieu.”¹⁸

Authentic prophets across religious traditions hardly separate religion from rest of life realities. Their vocation to be a ‘sacrament’ of God’s gracious presence to His people in this sense, facilitates God’s redemptive activity to express itself in their historical praxis.¹⁹ Relatedly, therefore a prophetic theology is always a public theology, concerned with relating faith to life and vice versa; although not all public theology can be prophetic theology, if it upholds and justifies oppressive forces. Obviously, therefore, a “prophetic public theology does not seek some utopian goal of perfection but recognizes that the current path is unsustainable.”²⁰

Prophet is to speak through words and deeds

The OT prophets are often asked to perform certain strange-looking symbolic gestures along with speaking out their words. Hosea, for instance, is ordered to marry a woman of low repute (Hos 1:2); symbolic acts abound in Jeremiah (Jer 13:1f; 19:1f; 27:2 etc.); Hosea is asked to give a symbolic name to his son (Hos 1:9). Such symbolic gestures being very much context-based, powerfully convey the intended message. In our times several such public gestures of Pope

¹⁸ Clint Le Bruyns, “Religion and the Economy? On Public Responsibility through Prophetic Intelligence, Theology and Solidarity”, *Journal of Theology for Southern Africa*, 142 Mar 2012, 88.

¹⁹ Tercio B. Junker, “Foundational Concepts for Prophetic Liturgical Praxis”, *Encounter*, 72 no 1 Spr 2011, 138-139.

²⁰ Byron Williams, “Prophetic public theology”, *Review & Expositor*, 111 no 2 May 2014, 169.

Francis have been highly prophetic and effective. The committed service to the poorest of the poor on the part of St. Theresa of Kolkata and her congregation has been another such public prophetic gesture. Unconditional forgiveness doled out to the murderers in the case of Blessed Rani Maria, Gladys Stain and many others can also be listed among such acts. In such public gestures obviously, a prophetic leader has often to find himself/herself at odds with prevailing customs, traditions, ways of understanding and behavioural patterns. Prophetic leadership needs to be contextually sensitive and creative precisely in conceiving such public gestures, while taking care not to perform them in a hypocritical manner, or for the sake of public show, but truly as expressions of contextual divine impulses.

Prophetic solidarity

One of the essential dimensions of prophetic leadership is that it functions in deep solidarity with the community. In the Biblical tradition, it is hard to imagine a prophet isolated from his people. A prophet weeps for and with his people in their distress (Lam 1:16); he deeply shares the anguish of his people (Jer 20:8). In fact, it is God's own solidarity with his people that gets expressed in the prophet's solidarity (Jer 13:17; Is 22:4; Mt 23:37). This resonates so well with the appeal of Pope Francis to all the shepherds of the Church to 'have the smell of the sheep'. Indeed, prophet Ezekiel sharply critiques the leadership that has no pastoral solidarity with the people: "You have not strengthened the weak, you have not healed the sick, you have not bound up the injured, you have not brought back the strayed, you have not sought the lost, but with force and harshness you have ruled them" (Ezek 34:4). A pastorally sensitive prophetic leadership does not inflict pain – it bears pain.²¹

An important dimension of a prophet's solidarity

²¹ Max De Pree, *Leadership is an Art*, (New York: Currency), 2004, 11. Referred to in Peter M. Sensenig, op.cit., 93.

is his/her ability to use the ‘language’ of his/her people effectively. ‘Language’ in this context refers to the entire symbolic world and the ethos. For instance, the power of the famous prophetic speech of Martin Luther King Jr. *I have a dream* consists precisely in connecting its prophetic critique of American racism with the dominant liberalism that swears by ‘freedom’.²²

An authentic solidarity, in this sense, works in a two-way process. It enables the prophetic leader to have an experiential understanding of the situation on the one hand, and because of which, on the other, it makes the prophetic message truly transformative to the addressees.

The liminal character of prophetic leadership

“Liminal” comes from the Latin *limen* (threshold). It refers to a transitional time and space. A prophetic leadership by its very nature is liminal, because it generally emerges in times of significant changes (for better or for worse) in the life of a people. The liminality of the times makes the prophet look back and forth²³ – backwards at the past times for guidance in the present; and forward to the future to look for inspiration. The apparent ‘chaos’ of a liminal situation offers the leadership space for creativity, criticality, innovation and unprecedented alternative thinking and planning. To the extent liminal situations are deemed as opportunities, they become occasions for growth and transformation.

As it is clear, liminal situations are rife with ambiguity and anxiety. Hence an effective leadership of the liminal times should have the audacity to face and live with such factors.²⁴ The pace with which changes take place in our time is truly unprecedented. A prophetic leadership of a liminal character has much to learn and offer today more than any

22 Peter M. Sensenig, *ibid.*, 104.

23 A. J. Orton and L. R. Withrow, “Transformative Potentials of Liminal Leadership”, *Journal of Religious Leadership*, 14 no 1 Spr 2015, 27.

24 *Ibid.*, 41.

time in the past. However, to handle liminality fruitfully the leadership needs to have a discerning heart that is attentive to the Spirit; or else one can become the victim of the dominant currents of the times.

Being a whistle-blower

A prophet always has the function of being a whistle-blower. Hence, he should expect the onslaught of various forces that stand to lose by his success. These forces can act in diverse ways, ranging from overt opposition to apparent benevolence towards the prophetic cause. Richard Wood finds even Government welfare schemes under certain conditions acting to tame the prophet by offering strings-attached aid.²⁵ In the current situation corporates can play similar roles by directly or indirectly promoting such *curricula* in educational institutions to make them faithful producers of only raw material (graduates, technicians and administrators) for the market economy. The institutions that fall prey to such corporate tactics, ignore other important dimensions of education in their curriculum. In this way emergence of a prophetic leadership can be effectively blocked for generations. More overtly, the individuals and institutions that act prophetically may be silenced using various means such as formulating impracticable rules and policies, legal harassment, use of muscle power, ceasing to provide necessary financial aid, etc. Paradoxically, light can shine only in darkness, and darkness, however pitch dark it is, can never overwhelm even a little spark of light (cf. Jn 1:5). A whistle-blower may be persecuted and even killed, but the whistleblowing activity as such cannot be silenced. More whistle-blowers soon continue the work of the one who is silenced.

“I will strike down the shepherd, and the sheep of the flock shall be scattered.” (Mt 26:31). But looking at certain

²⁵ See Richard L. Wood, “Taming Prophetic Religion? Faith-Based Activism and Welfare Provision”, *International Journal of Public Theology*, 3 no 1 2009, 78-95.

incidents of shepherds being struck down, this statement does not seem to get verified, at least on a permanent basis! We have examples starting right from our Shepherd Jesus himself, where ‘striking down’ of the shepherd created a more committed shepherd and flock of sheep who were willing to follow him. Be it Archbishop Oscar Romero, the Jesuit martyrs of El Salvador of 1980, or Blessed Rani Maria and the like, what is common to all these instances is when those who hold leadership positions directly confront the structures of injustice and pay the price, it makes a greater impact than if an ordinary mortal were to do the same. We draw an important lesson here: leadership in the Christian understanding, like that of Jesus of Nazareth makes a special impact, when it ‘lays down its life for the life of the world’. This is something intrinsic to Christian leadership and should never be considered as accidental, if it should bear the characteristics of the leadership shown by Jesus. Following these examples, we need to invent ways and means of coming out of some of the traditional understanding of leadership that needs to be ‘protected’ from all dangers, like a queen bee in a honeycomb. The efficacy of the leadership consists precisely in ‘falling into the ground....and thereby producing abundant fruit’ (Jn 12:24).

Prophetic leadership of the marginalized groups

In the biblical perspectives poor and the marginalized acquire a privileged position to hear, interpret and proclaim the redemptive Word of God (Ex 3; Lk 4:26f). In this sense, margins are the privileged spaces for doing the authentic hermeneutics of the Word. God who has a special sensitivity to the cry of the poor, makes their cry a medium of His Word. The Bible is an indisputable witness to this fact. It therefore necessitates that a prophetic leadership for today has direct and intrinsic links with the margins and their inhabitants. Monodeep Daniel mentions two such leadership patterns in the Indian context, especially in relation to the Church of North India: a. ***Peoples’ synod***, where the poor and the

oppressed refuse to be mere objects of pity and charity and take up the responsibility of being the agents of change, and b. the ***Dalit Avatari movement***. This refers to a Dalit movement in Uttar Pradesh, which in 1984, under the leadership of one Anand Philip (known as *Mahagyaniji*) developed prophetic and liberating rituals for the *Bhangi* community, who held Jesus as the Dalit *avatar* of God.²⁶

These movements are good examples to show that leadership need not necessarily consist in occupying administrative positions. In fact, as in the case of OT prophets, the administrative bodies, many a time, need to heed to the voices of such movements to truly ‘walk in the ways of the Lord’.

Inviting all to repent, demonizing none

It is tempting to identify prophets naively with judgment and condemnation. But a careful reading of the Bible shows us that the authentic prophets, although mediate oracles of judgment, do not really demonize anyone. In fact, some of them can even shock a conservative believer with their positive evaluation of some pagan invaders. For instance, king Cyrus is called ‘Lord’s shepherd’ (Is 44:28). ‘the anointed one (*christos, messiah*) of the Lord’ (Is 45:1). King Nebuchadnezzar is called ‘the Lord’s servant’ (Jer 27:6). The prophets saw a positive role of these pagan kings in carrying out God’s plan for the people of Judah. Prophetic critique of erring kings of Israel and Judah in the OT was intended to create repentance in them. Strong words of condemnation on the part of Jesus in the NT against the Jewish leaders and people, were truly aimed at causing repentance in them. Even in the thick of the Indian Independence struggle, Mahatma Gandhi did not demonize the British. In fact, he fasted and prayed to rid himself of such possible negative attitudes

²⁶ Monodeep Daniel, “Models of Leadership in the Indian Church: An Evaluation, *Studies in World Christianity*, 13 no 1 2007, 78f.

before every *satyagraha*. Indeed, prophetic leadership must constantly fight against the temptation to demonize its opponents.

Call of the Reign does not exclude anyone. It is the hearer of the call that exercises his/her freedom to heed or to ignore such a call. Prophetic leadership needs to deeply realize this truth and function accordingly.

The flipside of prophetic leadership

There have always been true and false prophets; perhaps, at least some of the ‘false prophets’ were/are subjectively honest, and yet something objectively makes them inauthentic. Here are a few such factors:

1. Lack of rootedness in the current context, giving rise to an extreme form of idealism in them.
2. Lack of constructive dialogue with those having opposite opinions, leading to blind dogmatism. We have an excellent contrary example in Jeremiah. Being challenged by Hananiah he goes away quietly (Jer 28:11), perhaps to consider his words in discernment, and then after some time he returns to prophesy again.
3. Lack of listening to the Word of God in the context, resulting in uttering one’s own words or those that are stolen from others (Jer 23:30), rather than those of God. This results in ‘blind guiding the blind’.
4. An ‘acquired situational narcissism’,²⁷ by which a prophetic leader can assume a larger than the real and realistic self-image. Leadership, then can shift from

²⁷ See Stephen Parsons, “Narcissism and Christian Leadership”, *Modern Believing*, 54 no 3 Jul 2013, 240-248. The Writer refers to ‘acquired situational narcissism’ in the case of some clergymen, who, because of certain types of ministries and the positive feedback thereby received, can eventually acquire such narcissistic or self-absorbing attitudes.

a service-orientation to self-enhancing one. This can further lead to losing sight of the God-given mission and falling prey to opportunism.

5. A self-righteous attitude, by which, criteria used to critique others are not used for a self-critique. Related to this is an un-examined life of the prophetic leader, which can lead to an acute discrepancy between his image as held by others and his internal/ personal life, which if gets widened beyond a certain limit can eventually cause the loss of his charisma.²⁸

Conclusion

There is a need to see prophetic leadership not so much as one among the various leadership roles, as a possible model or perspective to shape all such roles, in so far as they can be carried out with criticality and creativity, responding to the signs of the times, in the light of the experience of God's continuing involvement in personal and communitarian history. Like mysticism, authentic prophetic vocation too has several common dimensions across religious traditions. Prophetic praxes of stalwarts such as Buddha, Basava, Mahatma Gandhi, Martin Luther King Jr., Ambedkar have much in common with that of the OT and NT prophetic figures; especially in relation to promoting authentic and integral human liberation. This fact becomes a good boost to understand and cultivate prophetic leadership in an interreligious *cultus*. Prophetic leadership in this sense can establish fruitful interreligious bonds geared towards a shared mission of facilitating God's redemptive activity in the here and now. We Asians have a great task in realizing this possibility more than anyone else.

²⁸ Roger Heuser and Byron D. Klaus, "Charismatic Leadership Theory: A Shadow Side Confessed", *Pneuma*, 20 no 2 Fall 1998, 166.

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