The Birth and Death of Religious Leaders

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ABSTRACT: The phenomenon of religious leadership is a complex one. This article proposes that Ernest Becker's insight into the human tendency to deny death contributes to a better understanding of both the psychological and sociological dimensions of religious leadership. Specifically, it examines the role of transference in the leader-follower relationship and probes how this mechanism promotes the birth and demise of religious leaders. Some practical suggestions for healthy leader-follower relations are offered.

In a recent article in Human Development, William Kondrath of the Paulist Leadership and Renewal Project asserts that attempts to improve ministerial leadership have met with only limited success. This lack of effectiveness has characterized leadership training programs whether they emphasize changing the leader's personality, developing individual and/or group skills, or revamping the administrative structure. Moreover, problems with leadership are not restricted to the local level, but are found in every area of church life. For example, a woman religious, elected to the highest position of leadership in her congregation on the basis of her highly touted "spiritual leadership," finds herself virtually without support for re-election three years later. On the other hand, who can forget the sinister effectiveness of Jim Jones in motivating hundreds of dutiful followers not only to found a new religious and political community in a distant land, but to give their lives in a collective murder and suicide?

Each of these situations and the many others they typify raise the question, "Why?" In general, answers to this question have taken two paths: one that is rooted in an analysis of the social context of leadership, the other in an examination of the psychological factors that generate leadership. The proponents of social analysis generally follow or build on Max Weber's threefold classification of authority as legal, traditional, or charismatic. Social crisis is seen as playing a key role in the development of charismatic leadership which may exist in any of the three, but which becomes the dominant basis for authority when accepted by the majority of members of a society. The proponents of psychological susceptibility focus on psychoanalytic theory, in particular Freud's Group Psychology and the Analysis of the Ego. In addition, there have been attempts to show that these two approaches offer the same answer or, at least, answers that are complementary.

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This paper will respond to the question of leadership by means of the last of these approaches, one rooted in both psychology and social theory. Specifically, it will show how Ernest Becker's understanding of human nature explains the phenomenon of leadership in terms of mortality. However, prior to offering this response, it is necessary to bring the question of how leaders are born into sharper focus.

Where do leaders come from?

Although leadership has been defined in a variety of ways, in ordinary usage the term denotes "a relatively sustained and asymmetric exercise of influence by one individual, the leader, over others, the followers." Since one can be a leader only in relationship to followers, follower recognition and response are key elements in the birth and continued life of leaders. Willmer has identified and described four characteristics of such follower recognition and response: (1) the leader-image, (2) idea-acceptance, (3) compliance, and (4) emotional response. In an ordinary leader-follower relationship, the followers judge the leader to possess the skills needed to accomplish the tasks of the group and to have the qualities deemed admirable by the group. The leader's ideas gain acceptance because of their reasonableness and conformity to reality, at least as these are perceived by the followers. Similarly, the followers comply with the leader's directives because these directives are judged reasonable, or because of fear of the penalties attached to lack of compliance. Emotional response to leaders varies greatly, but popular leaders elicit such emotions as admiration and affection in their followers.

However, not all leader-follower relationships remain at this level. At times, followers escalate the quality of their responses to a leader, and the result is the birth of a charismatic leader. In such instances, the follower response exhibits the following qualities:

1. The leader is perceived by the followers as somehow superhuman.
2. The followers blindly believe the leader's statements.
3. The followers unconditionally comply with the leader's directives for action.
4. The followers give the leader unqualified emotional commitment.

I propose that the notion of the birth of charismatic leaders provides a context which suggests answers to the questions raised in the introduction to this paper. In other words, it provides a context in which to understand religious leadership. Why do leadership training programs for those in ministry meet with limited success at best? In this context, we may respond that the desired outcome is not merely an effective leader, but a charismatic one, and no skills, group work, or structural reorganization can guarantee the birth of charisma. Why does a person whose qualifications for leadership were summarized in the nebulous concept of "spiritual leadership" fail to find continued support? Considered in the light of charismatic leadership, we can respond that he or she