

## **The Development of the Leader and the Spirit: Integrating the Concepts toward Meaning-Making**

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### **Abstract**

Using data from the Multi-Institutional Study of Leadership, this study examines the relationship between the eight values of the Social Change Model of Leadership Development with a student's spiritual quest. Finding consistent positive relationship between the two constructs, the article discusses the intentional use of reflection in student leadership development programs to facilitate student growth in both leadership development and spiritual quest. Suggestions for implementing reflection are provided as well as discussion of further research.

### **Introduction**

In the middle of the 1920s a young Albanian took the first steps on a spiritual path leading her to become a leader in bringing compassion and hope to the unwanted. At the age of 18 this young woman, born Agnes Gonxha Bojaxhiu, left everything, never to see her family again, to begin a world changing spiritual journey. Shortly after the end of World War II, on a train ride from Calcutta to Darjeeling Agnes experienced a powerful spiritual transformation as she heard what she believed was the voice of God asking her to share His love with the very poor, sick, and dying little street children.

In 1979 this woman would become such a powerful force of compassion in the heart of Calcutta, India that Agnes, more commonly known as Mother Teresa, received one of the highest honors, the Nobel Peace Prize (Mother Teresa, 2007). She was known for saying that we should not wait for leaders, but ourselves – person to person. Mother Teresa, entering the darkest corners of the world that had become scarred by religious violence between Hindus and Muslims, began a story of leadership inseparable from her spiritual journey. It was in the midst of

deep spiritual reflection that she found the values that would guide her leadership story.

Like so many others, her leadership story was sparked by the spiritual center of her life. The biographies of many other well-recognized world leaders hold a similar spark, for example Mahatmas Gandhi, Martin Luther King, Jr., Joan of Arc, Jesus of Nazareth, and so many more. These individuals would forever change the world as their spiritual centers would provide direction for their lives. On the more local level, this same interplay between spirituality and leadership is lived out on college campuses every day. As students enter college, many of them pursue their identity and purpose in their lives, often developed from a central core of values and beliefs that define or shape their perspectives of the world (Chickering & Reisser, 1993).

This study will pursue the relationship between leadership development during the college experience and spirituality. Specifically, is there a positive relationship between the eight core values of the Social Change Model of Leadership Development and a student's spiritual quest? Additionally, this paper will conclude with how incorporating reflection into student leadership development programming can promote the inclusion of spiritual quest without endorsing one religion or spiritual path.

### **Spirituality and Leadership in the Literature**

In 2003 Astin, Astin, and Lindholm began a national study of student spirituality with the results published as *Cultivating the Spirit: How College Can Enhance Students' Inner Lives* (2011). The authors believed that students had an inherent desire to pursue the development of their spiritual selves, and that the college experience largely affects that pursuit. With the exception of a few earlier calls for the developing conversation on college student spirituality (Chickering, Dalton, & Stamm, 2005; Dalton & Crosby, 2006) no prior research on the spiritual lives of students had been fully explored, and certainly not on the scale Astin et al. (2011) proposed to conduct. Based on extensive data from 14,527 students in over 130 colleges and universities across the United States, the study measured five spiritual and five religious qualities. The spiritual qualities included equanimity, spiritual quest, ethic of caring, charitable involvement, and ecumenical worldview. In their study, religious qualities were composed of religious commitment, religious engagement, religious and social conservatism, religious skepticism, and religious struggle.

They found over the experience of the average college student, their spiritual qualities, as identified above, grow significantly as a result of their experience in higher education. Additionally, giving students more opportunities to connect

with their inner selves facilitates growth in academic and leadership skills, contributes to intellectual self-confidence and psychological well-being as well as enhancing satisfaction with the college experience (Higher Education Research Institute, 2010). In similar veins, Chickering, Dalton, and Stamm (2006) developed themes related to spirituality in higher education such as authenticity, vocation, community, and wholeness.

As one of the most cited authors on spiritual leadership, Louis Fry (2003) has developed a definition as “comprising the values, attitudes, and behaviors that are necessary to intrinsically motivate one’s self and others so that they have a sense of spiritual survival through calling and membership” (pp. 694-695). The theory presented incorporated a vision complimenting a sense of calling as well as establishing a social and organizational culture complimenting spiritual leadership. He presents spiritual leadership using vision, hope and faith, and altruistic love to create an environment where work becomes a reward in itself.

Multiple leadership theories or frameworks recognize elements of leadership that are inherently spiritual. For this study, the Social Change Model of Leadership includes elements which have spiritual implications. As developed by the Higher Education Research Institute (HERI), the Social Change Model targets eight core values to develop a model of leadership consistent with Rost’s (1991) post-industrial paradigm of leadership which is relational, transformative, process-oriented, learned, and change-directed phenomenon. The values include consciousness of self, congruence, commitment, collaboration, common purpose, controversy with civility, citizenship, and change (HERI, 1996).

Within this study, the eight elements of the Social Change Model (SCM) will be studied in conjunction with spirituality. Many of these elements have a logical direct connection to the idea of spirituality. For example, consciousness of self speaks of being aware of one’s beliefs and values that contribute to the individual’s motivations for action. Although not directly equivalent to religious engagement or commitment (Astin, Astin, & Lindholm, 2011) which would demonstrate a most direct relationship, the pursuit of spirituality helps to develop the student’s beliefs and values as they search for meaning and purpose and discuss issues of the meaning of life with others. Common purpose reflects working with shared values or goals. Students who are like-minded about their pursuit of spirituality or explore the meaning of life through a shared religious belief system are also likely to have a greater sense of common purpose.

This study carries this research and others like it to examine the links between spirituality and leadership development, and extending our understanding of what Fry (2003) referred to as spiritual leadership. Specifically, within the context of higher education, this study will explore relationship between spirituality and

leadership in college students. Based on the literature, it is hypothesized that there is a positive relationship between the development of a student's spiritual life and leadership development.

The construct of authentic leadership presented by George (2004) presents a definition of leadership indivisible from one's spiritual center. Five dimensions of leadership within this construct include purpose, values, heart, relationships, and self-discipline. George writes, "Leaders are defined by their values and their character. The values of the authentic leader are shaped by personal beliefs, developed through study, introspection, and consultation with others – and a lifetime experience" (p. 20).

### **Research Methods**

Utilizing data obtained through the Multi-Institutional Study of Leadership (MSL) survey questionnaire, adapted from the Socially Responsible Leadership Scale (SRLS), this study is conducted using data already within the national dataset of the MSL for a large, secular public research university in the southeast to examine the correlation between measurements on the leadership scale with a spirituality scale developed for the same instrument. The instrument collects information on demographics, input variables, environmental variables, and output variables.

This research builds upon that done by Gehrke (2008) whose work focused a small, secular, selective liberal arts school. Data used in this article were collected as part of the Multi-Institutional Study of Leadership 2010. For further information regarding this study, please visit: [www.leadershipstudy.net](http://www.leadershipstudy.net).

### **Procedures**

Invitations to participate in the study were sent out to 4,499 students of a large southeastern public research university via email, followed by up to three additional reminders of the request for participation. The data management services for the website were provided by The Center for Student Studies. The email invitations were personalized to meet the needs of unique institutional requirements and incentive programs. Each student was provided a unique identification number, and the initial survey question provided informed consent to participants. Informed consent was required, and for those selecting not to consent to participate, their survey was terminated and no further contact was made as part of the MSL study.

### **Participants**

A total of 1,335 students responded to the request, and 1,047 fully completed the questionnaire for a response rate of 23.3%. However, for the purpose of this survey, only those students who were also included in the spirituality sub-study of the MSL are included in the analysis. Of those who completed the survey, 509 were invited to participate in the spirituality sub-study and completed the section. Female students responded in larger numbers (63.9%,  $n=352$ ) than their male counterparts (36.1%,  $n=184$ ) by almost two to one. The percentages are significantly different from the institutional percentages of 45.3% men and 54.7% women; however, the response rate complements the level of response Gehrke (2008) experienced in his study.

Racial representation in the study complimented institutional averages relatively closely with the percentages of Hispanic and Asian American students being potentially over represented by only three percentage points. The racial/ethnic composition of the sample was as follows: 66.8% White/Caucasian ( $n=340$ ); 15.3% Hispanic ( $n=78$ ); 9.4% African American/Black ( $n=48$ ); 6.1% Asian American ( $n=31$ ); 0.6% Hawaiian/Pacific Islander ( $n=3$ ); and 0.4% American Indian ( $n=2$ ). Furthermore, class representation complimented the university at large. Junior (23.6%,  $n=120$ ) and senior (25.3%,  $n=129$ ) students were included in higher numbers, followed by graduate students (18.5%,  $n=94$ ). Freshman (15.3%,  $n=78$ ) and sophomores (16.5%,  $n=84$ ) were lowest, but compliment this university's average and trends with more students transferring in during their junior and senior years.

### **Instrument**

The MSL survey questionnaire is adapted from the Socially Responsible Leadership Scale (SRLS) which measures the eight core values of the social change model, as discussed earlier in the literature review (HERI, 1996). In 2009 the original instrument was updated based on findings from the original research and feedback from participating institutions. The MSL survey includes more than 400 variables, scales, and composite measures. The eight core values of the social change model were measured using 71 items on a 5-point Likert scale with responses from "strongly disagree (1)" to "strongly agree (5)." For the 2010 study the questions were identical to the questionnaire used in 2009 which presented the following Cronbach Alphas of reliability measurement: consciousness of self = .80, congruence = .85, commitment = .84, collaboration = .83, common purpose = .85, controversy with civility = .75, citizenship = .91, and change = .83.

For the 2010 study "spirituality: search for meaning" scale was measured using five items on the same Likert scale as the above values. The five items were averaged to create a composite measure with a Cronbach Alpha for reliability measurement equal to .91. The conceptualization behind this scale was very

similar to the “Spiritual Quest” concept described by Astin, Astin, and Lindholm (2011) described as “a process oriented measure” which reflects “an engagement in the search for meaning and purpose in life” (p. 28). The questions included in this scale included: How often do you search for meaning and purpose in your life? How often do you reflect on finding answers to the mysterious of life? and, How often do you think about developing a meaningful philosophy of life.

Data analysis was performed only on those students who answered all the questions for the social change model values as well as the spirituality sub-study measurement.

Table 1. Relationships Between 8 Measures of Leadership and Spirituality, Pearson’s *r* coefficients

	Spirituality
Consciousness of self	.279
Congruence	.305
Commitment	.187
Collaboration	.291
Common purpose	.284
Controversy with civility	.312
Citizenship	.365
Change	.262

Correlations were significant at the 0.01 level

## Results

Pearson *r* coefficients were calculated for the each relationship between the measure of “Spirituality: Search for Meaning” and each of the eight SCM values of leadership. The coefficients for each relationship are displayed in Table 2. Per the results as provided in Table 1, the relationship between spirituality is most closely related to the SCM values of citizenship, controversy with civility, and then congruence with Pearson’s *r* values of .365, .312, and .305. The weakest relationship found was between spirituality and commitment with an *r* value of .187. It is also interesting to note that all values were in the positive. The essence of the spirituality scale’s contributing questions spoke to the idea of the search for meaning and purpose and the development of a philosophy of life as a result of that search, and compliments the “Spiritual Quest” scale developed as described by Astin, Astin, and Lindholm (2011). This is also most similar to the “Spiritual Quest” measurement as described in Gerhke’s study (2008).

## **Discussion**

Across all eight values of leadership in the Social Change Model, there were positive relationships with the spirituality measurement used in this study as demonstrated by the Pearson *r* coefficients. The repeated consistent positive relationships compliments the findings of Gerhke (2008) as well as the suggestion by Astin, Astin, and Lindholm (2011) students who show substantial growth in spiritual development also demonstrate higher levels of leadership development. In combination with these earlier studies, this data demonstrates there seems to be a consistent, spiritual quality to leadership.

### **Citizenship and Spirituality**

The strongest relationship in both this study and that of Gerhke's (2008) was between spirituality and citizenship. As defined by the Social Change Model, citizenship speaks to a sense being connected responsibly to the community and society resulting in the individual working for positive change to benefit the community and others (HERI, 1996). Either in their search for a meaning to life and a sense of purpose, students develop a sense of responsibility for the larger world, or their sense of citizenship helps them to develop a deeper, meaningful philosophy of life.

### **Controversy with Civility and Spirituality**

Interestingly, controversy with civility followed closely behind civility in this relationship with spirituality. Included in the conceptualization of spiritual quest by Astin, Astin, and Lindholm (2011) is the idea that "spiritual growth is facilitated through interaction with others" (p. 28). By engaging in the messy and contentious discussions of spirituality, faith, and religion, students have the opportunity to develop the skill of discussing tough topics while demonstrating respect for others, a willingness to hear others' views, and to exercise restraint in criticizing others' views and actions (HERI, 1996). And likewise, the skills developed in learning how to debate the tough secular matters openly and with civility are translatable to the discussions involved in the spiritual quest. The data continues to compliment the logical connection in the behaviors, and once again is affirmed in Gerhke's (2008) findings.

### **Congruence and Spirituality**

In addition to a very strong logical connection, the relationship between congruence and this “spiritual quest” was also reaffirmed in the findings. Although this study cannot prove the cause and effect relationship, it would not be hard to make the argument that in the student’s search for personal meaning and spiritual exploration, the student would have to develop a sense of deeply-held beliefs and convictions. In combination with the sense of being part of a greater whole, the student would increasingly behave in ways that are consistent with these beliefs and convictions.

### **Commitment and Spirituality**

Perhaps most surprising, however, at least to this researcher, was the relatively weak connection between the development of this measure of spirituality and the leadership value of commitment. In the Social Change Model commitment was defined as psychic energy which motivates a person to serve and drives the collective effort as well as implies passion, intensity, and duration, and it is directed toward group activity and the intended outcomes (HERI, 1996). In Gerhke’s (2008) study, the Pearson  $r$  was a very low score of .10, and at an even lower significance level of  $p < .05$ . In this study, the Pearson  $r$  was only .187, and the next highest relationship was at .262. What is it about this relationship that causes such low results compared to the other seven values? Perhaps it comes when the student’s religious struggle ends up dominating the students spiritual quest creating a sense of inner confusion and developing instability in the passion and intensity of these students (HERI, 1996; Astin, Astin, Lindholm, 2011).

### **Implications**

Consistent confirming evidence was demonstrated in the consistent positive correlation of the eight values of the Social Change Model of Leadership Development and the measure of spiritual quest. Combined with the earlier cited research, the empirical evidence is strengthened in recognizing the relationship between spiritual and leadership development. The results present the idea that in leadership development programming and leadership education, we should not ignore the spiritual impact on the student. Socially responsible leadership and the development of a meaning and purpose in life can go hand in hand in a complementary, intertwined relationship. The results of which suggest areas in which leadership development educators can find new opportunities for developing their students.

One such opportunity should be an increased inclusion of reflection exercises in leadership development programming and curricula (Reave, 2005). Reflection has



already been recognized as valuable in developing the student and encouraging higher levels of thinking and analysis (Schroeder, 1996; Moon, 1999; Wood, 1996; Eyler & Giles, 1996). By promoting opportunities for students to develop an understanding of their guiding values, beliefs, and principles, educators are developing opportunities for the student to develop their leadership and spirituality. For those leadership educators who incorporate reflexive opportunities in their programs, this study actually provides a reaffirmation. For others, the evidence suggests facilitation of leadership development in conjunction with opportunities for developing meaning and purpose could result in more effective programming.

Posner (2009) stressed “where leaders must go to find their voice is within. We have to get our students to explore their inner territory....Clarity of values provides the confidence to make the tough decisions, to act with determination, and to take charge of your life” (p. 4). Reflection is becoming a developing competency for effective leadership (Roberts, 2008). Before a student can fully embrace the components of authentic leadership, a student must develop their understanding of their operational and end values (George, 2004). Furthermore, Guthrie and Thompson (2010) found that “student experiences are strengthened and learning is deepened when institutions intentionally create environments that integrate theory, practice, and reflection” (p. 54). In developing the habit of reflection, the framework should include three attributes: open-mindedness, responsibility, and whole-heartedness (Densten & Gray, 2001).

This research alone cannot suggest or prove that including spiritual development opportunities will result in higher leadership development, or that leadership development encourages spiritual development. However, these two avenues of development, when used in conjunction with each other, might reflect a more holistic approach to the individual development.

Gerkhe (2008) made a suggestion worth repeating in this conversation:

Engaging in searching for spiritual meaning through the lens of socially responsible leadership aspects may serve as a means to leadership development in its own right. Students who are engaging in spiritual exploration may be able to develop leadership skills through retreats and programs aimed at developing greater spiritual awareness that provide reflection around components of leadership related to spirituality. (p. 357)

As leadership development educators looking for new opportunities to build relationships with other campus programs, they may want to look no further than joint efforts with organizations like their campus interfaith council or the Interfaith Youth Core, an organization founded by Eboo Patel which works with college students and administrators to promote interfaith cooperation.

Additionally, programs like Florida State University's Spiritual Life Project are growing as institutions recognize similar findings to that of Astin, Astin, and Lindholm (2011), and seek to help students develop their spiritual centers and work with interfaith councils.

### **Limitations and Avenues for Future Research**

The use of one sample from one institution is an initial limitation to these findings. However, when viewed in conjunction with the findings of Gerhke (2008), and Astin, Astin, and Lindholm (2011), the data presented here may help to develop more generalizable results. Using results at a national level would make these findings much stronger.

Although this study has been able to provide a much more representative sample in terms of race and ethnicity than Gerhke (2008), there are still limitations in terms of the gender imbalance. Again, larger studies across different institution sizes and types would help to offset this limitation in future studies.

As the MSL questionnaire focused on only one limited perspective of spiritual development, the results may be too narrow or limited in nature for full application and analysis. Perhaps the addition of the spiritual and religious content areas or domains used in the study presented by Astin, Astin, and Lindholm (2011) could help present a much more complete quantitative analysis of the relationship and interplay between spirituality and leadership development. Additionally, the constructs and definitions for spirituality and leadership are still nebulous and debated concepts as Gehrke (2008) suggested. Perhaps combining both survey instruments could help to refine our understanding of these two concepts further.

One area that would have been interesting to study further would be to control for *social perspective taking*, an item included in the MSL questionnaire, but was not an item for those students included in the spirituality sub-study. Dugan, Bohle, Kodama, and Leblanc (2012) found that social perspective taking, or "walking in someone else's shoes," was a significant factor in leadership development in the transition from individual values into growth in group values.

Finally, a qualitative approach might help to provide a much more in-depth understanding of the interplay between spiritual development and leadership development. Gerhke (2008) suggested the addition of a question allowing for follow-up, but a well-constructed study of students engaged in meaning-making, in conjunction with these quantitative findings, could help to further flesh out these very qualitative concepts.

## **Conclusion**

Spirituality and leadership are such complex pictures, and students repeatedly demonstrate a desire to engage in those conversations. They continue to search for leaders or to become leaders well-grounded in a philosophy of life that demonstrates the value of the other and the process by which we make meaning of the world. Programs like the Spiritual Life Project at Florida State University or the Interfaith Youth Core are embracing these ideas of the spiritual side of leadership development. As we develop a more holistic approach and understanding of student and how they mature, findings like those presented here shed more light on how to design intentional, reflective, and meaningful learning. In returning to the opening story about the life of Mother Teresa, it was during her time of private and personal, but structured reflection that her purpose in life, ministering to the needs of the impoverished, became apparent. Creating intentional but open opportunities for students to jointly develop their leadership while they also explore their purpose and meaning in life may create a more solid effective program.

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