

HEROIC LEADERSHIP

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The office of pastor, elder, bishop, minister, priest, and other such titles presumes both an orientation toward the Divine and an ability to function as a leader. Since both spirituality and leadership are expected in people who hold religious office, confusing or conflating one with the other is easy to do, but is not particularly helpful in the field of religion.

The author, Chris Lowney, a former-Jesuit-turned-executive at J. P. Morgan & Co., writes "leadership is a way of living in which basic life strategies and principles reinforce one another" (245). According to Lowney, we are all leaders, and he firmly believes that leaders lead twenty-four hours a day, seven days a week. Such a definition and attitude toward leadership, I fear, tends to make leadership somewhat synonymous with spirituality. This is a major difficulty with this otherwise engaging book that might have been more accurately titled, *Heroic Spirituality*.

Lowney focuses on the history of the Roman Catholic religious order commonly known as the Jesuits, but which is officially known as the Society (or Company) of Jesus. Throughout the book he relates the stories of a handful of impressive Jesuits, from its founder, Ignatius Loyola, and its co-founder Francis Xavier, to other luminaries such as Roberto de Nobili and Mateo Ricci who forged the early reality and eventual reputation of this religious organization in places like India and China. The unique stories of this handful of men form a hagiographical mosaic on which this author superimposes his articulations and reflections on leadership.

Why are these people who are deemed successful leaders by this author, in fact, successful? The answer, to anyone even moderately familiar with the Jesuit heritage is, of course, the *Spiritual Exercises*, a program of self-examination leading to self-awareness that carries the participant throughout a lifetime functioning as a leader.

The *Spiritual Exercises*, developed by Ignatius of Loyola himself, "encapsulate the company's (the Jesuit religious

order) vision and serve as each Jesuit's preeminent personal development experience" (114). Jesuits, beginning with Xavier and the nine other men who first gathered round Ignatius Loyola to the most recent entrant, experience these exercises through a thirty day retreat. In addition to the exercises, the author cites other activities and concepts which form Jesuits throughout their lives, e.g., the *Examen*, a brief period of meditation on daily experiences carried out thrice daily, *Magis*, going further than expected or first imagined, and the *Foundation of Love*, the ability to put love into practice through action.

There can be little doubt that some Jesuits accomplished herculean tasks in regions of the largely unknown world of their times. *Heroic Leadership* does a good job documenting these major personalities of the Jesuit tradition. Nor can the unique power of the *Spiritual Exercises* be understated. They have contributed mightily to the spiritual formation of many a Jesuit, former Jesuit, and countless other people, both men and women. Lowney rightly manifests great reverence and regard for the power of Ignatius' exercises.

Yet, there is an essential problem with this paean to Ignatius, his exercises, and his followers. The problem, as alluded to earlier, is that the author has appeared to mistaken spirituality for leadership. His approach to leadership is totally person-centered: a good person is a good leader, a better person is a better leader, and a great person is a great leader. This great-man theory of leadership gets reinforced at the expense of more recent studies by other schools of leadership, that identify leadership as contextual, influential, group-oriented, relational, and episodic. Lowney's leaders, impressive though they may be as missionary adventurers who did many good things, come across largely as individualists, and, at times, even loners.

By focusing on only a handful of Jesuits, Lowney also ignores the vast numbers of Jesuits, though formed through the *Spiritual Exercises*, who never functioned well as leaders. Although he makes occasional passing references to the many Jesuits who formed the ramparts of their educational institutions, the author offers no substantial explanation or reflection on how they were leaders other than proclaiming them so. Likewise, he does not deal with Jesuits who were outriders,

like the ground breaking political theorist, John Courtney Murray, or the internationally acclaimed paleontologist, Pierre Teilhard de Chardin, the brilliant scripture scholar, John L. McKenzie, or the anti-war activist, Daniel Berrigan. And why this author dwells exclusively on Jesuit personalities from long ago rather than contemporary members is yet another lacuna in his research universe.

Lowney makes no attempt to demonstrate if or how the *Spiritual Exercises* might be made relevant to non-Christians who don't have much consciousness of the Jesus story. As the United States and many other countries become more and more religiously diverse, what does a Jesus-centered model of leadership have to offer pluralistic workforces? Another concern the text raises is the male-only tone and tenor of this book. I find it peculiar that anyone writing a book on leadership today would not address its relevance to gender. Lowney's research universe, in addition to being extraordinarily small and excruciatingly select, is exclusively male.

Don't look for much insight into or application of the more recent schools of leadership theory in this book. Nor will readers attuned to the complexities and realities of a pluralistic and interfaith worldview find much to guide them into this future. Do look, however, for a powerful spirituality understandable to people with a knowledge of Jesus-centered faith.

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