
**ACADEMY OF RELIGIOUS LEADERSHIP PRESIDENTIAL
ADDRESS: ENGAGING SACRED TEXTS FOR RELIGIOUS
LEADERSHIP¹**

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I am increasingly discontent with the state of our discipline, Religious Leadership, generally, and my participation in the conversation, more specifically. It is too easy for the conversation on religious leadership to remain in the practice of translating social scientific literature for religious organizations. The *context* of our work can too easily be reduced to “what is religious about leadership studies?” There is good reason to do this translation work with our students, and yet, it is not enough for the scholarly community of religious leadership. Additionally, my concern with the practice of translation is that leadership literature can discuss the concepts of context and contingency, yet as my students notice, can often miss the daily actions of injustice and oppression in the world. I think religious leadership has particularities about it that invite us to make a genuine contribution to the broader leadership field that may then need translating work from and for nonreligious contexts. I am also hopeful that, in the words of my teacher and our friend, Craig Van Gelder, we can do better. This is less a statement of progress than one of presence and attention to the world that is set before us.

I initially entered the leadership conversation as a missiologist facing the writings of Barth and Bonhoeffer through the lens of Jürgen Moltmann who was asking, “How can we speak of God in light of such unspeakable tragedy and inhumanity?” Additionally, I was reading Lesslie Newbigin, who, upon returning to England following decades of missionary leadership in India, asked, “What would be involved in a genuinely missionary encounter between the gospel and the culture that is shared by the peoples of Europe and North America, their colonial and cultural off-shoots, and the growing

¹ This address was delivered at the annual meeting of the Academy of Religious Leadership in Chicago on April 15, 2016.

company of educated leaders in the cities of the world—the culture which those of us who share it usually describe as “modern”? These two locations shape my engagement with this year’s theme and with our community.

Before We Do *Sacred*, a Word About *Religious*

We are the Academy of Religious Leadership. I am often curious what this word *religious* means. For some reason, the necessity of an adjective in front of *leadership* is peculiar to me. I recall Patrick Lencioni saying in 2014 at the Global Leadership Summit, “I am growingly tired of the term *Servant Leadership* because I do not think that there is any other kind of leadership....” I agree with him on *servant* and believe that without some attention, the same could become true of *religious*. I believe that the *religious* in front of *leadership* is providing a different *kind*. *Religious*, for us, according to our by-laws, has something to do with theology and critical theological reflection in the teaching of religious leadership. Our guiding assumptions attached to our bylaws say, “The conversations generated about religious leadership will seek to incorporate both biblical/theological foundations and theoretical insights from a diverse range of disciplines.”²

This is a bit ambiguous, yet the tenor and ethos of our community and gatherings and the location from which our participants come are proposing that *religious* has something to do with God and belief in God (theology) and sacred texts (biblical/theological foundations). Borrowing from Abraham Joshua Heschel, who proposes that religion grows out of response to what is there, religion is not a feeling for the mystery of living or a sense of awe, wonder, and amazement. The root of religion is the question what to do with the *feeling* for the mystery of living—what to do with awe, wonder and amazement. Religion begins with a consciousness that something is being

² www.arl-jrl.org

asked of us. It is, in that sense, eternal asking, in which the soul is caught up and in which humanity's answer is elicited.³

It is my hope that our collective soul is caught in this year's conversation—that we experience a transcendence. That we will engage something deeper than and amplifying of our past year's conversations that have largely sought to translate other leadership literature and conversations for religious organizations, including the work of teaching. I am hopeful that we will engage with a collective conscious that something is being asked of us, in our work of teaching with, to, and for religious leaders, who are also awakening or will awaken to what is being asked of them. It is my hope that we wake up and wrestle with what we are to do with the *sense* (to use Charles Taylor's term) for the mystery of living—what to do with awe, wonder, and amazement. I am not asking for us to come this weekend to agree or disagree, but to engage beyond the social imaginary of the university/academy, which seeks to “get behind everything and thus control and manipulate everything.”⁴ I am asking us to engage in the practices of desire, wonder, and curiosity—not simply with one another (which has been a common practice at ARL for years) but also with the subject at hand and sacred texts. I ask that we neither master the text nor become slaves to it, but as Jesus invited his followers to consider—we befriend (John 20).

The Theme and Its Direction

When I announced that engaging sacred texts for the teaching of religious leadership would be the theme for this year, I quickly felt the energy in the room rise. This was not an energy of joy or possibility, but of suspicion, anxiety, and confusion. There were multiple reasons for this (most justifiable), yet one of them was the difficulty of such a topic in a diverse room of folks. Suspicions around disagreement on questions of authority,

³ Abraham Joshua Heschel, *I Asked for Wonder*, ed. Samuel H. Dresner (New York: Crossroads, 1983), 38.

⁴ Thomas Boogaart, “Cosmology and the Bible” (unpublished, 2015).

intent, meaning, ethics, and power animated the conversation in ways that made hearing difficult. I understand this.

We live in a world that doesn't know what to do with the sacred. We now have hundreds of years of living that have tried to squelch the sacred in favor of economy, military, and therapy. A cosmology necessary to recognize the sacred has all but eroded. The term *sacred* is a word some of us use in our religious circles, yet when it comes to explaining what we mean, we have a harder time. In my particular Reformed Christian circle, *sacred* can often be said with a sense of separateness, like holiness. It too easily becomes a cheap transcendence that represses what is truly human, a sentimentality or a bowdlerizing, whereby *sacred* holds onto promises that the world can be better as a way to gloss over the difficult aspects of existence, such as suffering. A Western Theological Seminary student, Maggie Rust, gently yet wisely asked, "What if *sacred* simply means 'something, or someone, is sacred when they have been touched by the presence of the Spirit, the Lord and Giver of Life, the Breath that moved over the deeps and created and animated our world?'"⁵ This is an encompassing definition.

My colleague, Dr. Tom Boogaart, laments the secularity where unbelief is a possibility. He narrates the Galileo story such that the scientific rationality of the world diminishes religion to privatized and personal salvation. Science is now where we discover "how the heavens go" and Scripture only has authority on "how to get to heaven." We have abandoned cosmology for universality, and *sacred* is simply a matter of personal and private salvation. Sacred text is simply a guidebook on how to get to heaven. There is no desire, wonder, or play in the text, only obedience. This meaning of *sacred* may be largely lost on a Galileo crowd dedicated to the universe-ity and lost on cosmology, but I am hoping that our conversations can move into the sacred and remain present to the possibility of the sacred for a moment. I am hoping that we share a theological desire, which believes the Spirit in sacred texts is teaching us

⁵ Maggie Rust, "Exodus 19:16–25" (A Sermon at Western Theological Seminary, April 13, 2016).

how the heavens go, rather than teaching us how to get to heaven.

For Boogaart (and I believe Charles Taylor), a secular age is now fact, and the religious leaders of our age need to recognize the gap that is now among us. Our desire for transcendence has become a desire for a connected cosmos, where angels and spirits hover, and living in faith is an affective epistemology that loves, desires, and wonders for understanding God truly, as suggested by David Kelsey.

I would like to deepen the meaning of *sacred*. The closer we are to the earth, to our neighbors, the land, our enemies, and our families (which may be the same as the former), the clearer we will see the gap between God and us, and the clearer will the sacred become. Being tied to the earth, a location, is participation in God. I agree with Charles Taylor, who argues not whether we participate in “immanence,” but how. Transcendence is not an escape; it is an ethic, an agency, and an aesthetic for being present in the world, albeit differently. Accepting the inability to control, manipulate, or know (assumptions of a closed system) invites a rejection of academic overconfidence. I am hopeful that recognizing an ever-wider chasm between the divine and us will not promote *distance* but desire (patience), not certainty but curiosity and wonder (inquiry), not apathy but perseverance (solidarity in suffering).⁶ Sensing this gap will heighten the sacred’s presence in secularization, or as Abraham Joshua Heschel proposes, “The road to the sacred leads through the secular.”⁷

Texts and Their Inherent Invitation to Playfulness

Scott Hagley will unpack texts and playfulness following Ricoeur in his article “Cultivating Response-able Leadership Postures: Ricoeur’s Hermeneutic Phenomenology and the Biblical Text.” Scott and I share perspectives on the power of text to shape a community and form religious leaders. I simply

⁶ See David Kelsey, *Eccentric Existence: A Theological Anthropology* (New York: Westminster John Knox Press, 2009).

⁷ Heschel, 57.

want to take up one piece of this and refer you to Hagley's essay for further implications.

My nine-year-old son is fascinated with Harry Potter. He reads voraciously, and his reading becomes action with the conclusion of each chapter. I watched his conversion into a world that did not previously exist. He entered it as a reader, and it is forming him in his body. This is what texts do. Neighbors can discover Micah playing outside with a six-foot cardboard tube and a stick enacting a Quidditch game. The first time Micah engaged in such textual play, he returned to the kitchen from outside, leaving his magic wand on the front steps. His face was quizzical, and he asked, "Dad, why did this happen? Why did Snape do this if he was good?" I was forced into discovering his text with him (I am now constantly trying to catch up to his reading). The texts are changing him, and as he enters into the story more deeply, he is discovering and experiencing the fullness of humanity: pain, sadness, laughter/joy, and suffering. He is participating in an affective epistemology. And he is being converted.

Conversion is a suffering category, yet the other side of this suffering is a hope that is playful—a hope that worlds are discoverable and beyond our possession. We live in a world that is risk-averse, security-driven, and self-preserving—a world where we believe all things can be controlled, determined, and known. The academy is a social imaginary of this very nature, and we have degrees, titles, and tenure, which secure these destructive habits for us. The practices of the academic social imaginary do not create fullness for others but often feelings of inadequacy, resentment, and restlessness, which further embed the power of the imaginary.

One of the gifts of the trade in religious leadership is curiosity and discovery around cosmology, transcendence, and the world as texts toward faithful action. I believe religious leadership is a narrative action that engages at the intersection of the Word with the world.⁸ The Judeo-Christian and Islamic

⁸ See Kyle J. A. Small, "Formation of Christian Leaders: Forming Faithful and Just Actions for the Sake of the World" in *Handbook of Religious Leadership*,

worlds submit to a sacred word that both precipitates tradition and does not allow tradition to remain the same. The tradition-oriented perspective relates deeply to a qualitative mind. The Word, in the Christian tradition, is primary and deserves a narrative hearing, or an exploratory hearing, before it is explained, controlled, or manipulated. It invites capaciousness and playfulness. It asks to be embodied and practiced before scrutinized. The world can be seen similarly. Investing in sacred texts invites the postures for also being present in the world.

***Paideia* as a Methodology for Discovering Worlds**

Paideia is an ancient educational practice that relies on texts for the culturing and formation of a person. *Paideia* is a form of education centered in virtue and cultural engagement through the continual exercise of learning (*mathesis*), teaching (*didaskalia*), and practice (*askesis*) with the goal of creating a *habitus*, or second nature. *Paideia* predates the theory/practice split and conceives of learning as ongoing action. When action occurs, it is recorded, studied, and reacted to through the generations of learners. This is how ongoing learning and *habitus* emerge. The second nature is a disposition of redemption. Redeemed identity, or *habitus*, “abandons the aristocratic idea that character and morality can be inherited by blood, but not acquired.”⁹ Within a Christian understanding of *paideia*, the *habitus* is a return to the *imago Dei*, which throughout the Hebrew and Christian Scriptures calls forth participation with God and one another through the power of the Holy Spirit. Christian *paideia* assumes community, theology, and the Spirit. Leadership formation as ethics adopts *paideia* as it seeks a traditioned community to discern and interpret the critical moments as leaders and their communities seek new worlds of participation.

Paideia was a process of culturing the soul—a process of formation. *Paideia* has survived significant changes, and when

2 vols., ed. Sharon Callahan, et al. (Thousand Oaks, Calif.: Sage Publications, 2013).

⁹ Werner Jaeger, *Paideia: The Ideals of Greek Culture* (Oxford, England: Oxford University Press, 1967), 303.

Christians adopted the educational process, they had the intention of knowing the good, the divine, and the whole transformation of the person.¹⁰ The basis for *paideia* was an engagement with texts, and the movement went from text to personal appropriation of the source. This movement was an embodied exercise that was blind to a separation between text and action.¹¹ The movement from text to personal appropriation of the source is less linear and fragmented than more rational movements from theory to practice, yet it benefits from the critical question of the secular age, and it moves us toward faithful action. Cultivating a process of leadership formation between the immanent and the transcendent, or more commonly said, between Athens and Berlin is, then, a process ordered to the same end, a community of leaders under critical orders, toward forming communities for faithfulness and justice.¹² I invite us to practice this very thing. To risk in such a way that we can engage one another in, with, for, and against text(s).

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¹⁰ David Kelsey, *Between Athens and Berlin: The Theological Education Debate* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1993), 9.

¹¹ Kelsey, 9.

¹² Kelsey, 9.