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**Youngmi MOON**

Associate professor,  
Department of Social Welfare,  
Baekseok Arts University,  
South Korea.

## A Study on Servant Leadership and Christian Spirituality

**Youngmi MOON**

### Abstract

This paper examines the intersection of servant leadership and Christian spirituality, exploring their shared principles, theoretical frameworks, and implications for leadership theory and practice. Drawing on a comprehensive literature review, we investigate the background of effective leadership, the emergence of servant leadership, and the influence of Christian spirituality on leadership values. We discuss theoretical frameworks linking servant leadership and Christian spirituality, practical applications of servant leadership, and the integration of Christian spiritual values in leadership development. Additionally, we suggest future research directions, including cross-cultural perspectives and the exploration of contingent factors. Overall, this paper contributes to a deeper understanding of the relationship between servant leadership and Christian spirituality, offering insights for leadership theory and practice.

**Keywords:** Servant Leadership, Christian Spirituality.

### 1. Introduction

#### 1-1 Background of Effective Leadership in Organizational Environments

In contemporary organizational environments, characterized by rapid globalization, technological advancements, and shifting socio-economic landscapes, effective leadership stands as a critical determinant of organizational success and sustainability (Avolio & Gardner, 2005; Yukl, 2013). Leaders play a pivotal role in guiding organizations through complexities, uncertainties, and turbulent changes, thereby shaping the organizational culture, fostering innovation, and driving performance outcomes (Avolio & Gardner, 2005; Northouse, 2018).

The significance of effective leadership in organizational contexts can be attributed to its multifaceted impact on various facets of organizational functioning. Leadership influences employee motivation, engagement, and job satisfaction, thereby impacting individual and collective performance levels (Judge et al., 2004; Podsakoff et al., 2014). Moreover, effective leadership is instrumental in fostering a conducive work environment characterized by trust, collaboration, and open communication, which are vital for promoting creativity, problem-solving, and knowledge sharing (Walumbwa et al., 2008; Yukl, 2013).

Despite its acknowledged importance, the landscape of leadership theory and practice has evolved significantly over time, reflecting changing organizational dynamics, emerging leadership challenges, and evolving stakeholder expectations (Northouse, 2018). Traditional leadership models, characterized by hierarchical structures and authoritative decision-making, have increasingly given way to more participative, inclusive, and relationship-oriented approaches to leadership (Avolio & Gardner, 2005; Bass & Riggio, 2006).

In this context, the concept of servant leadership has gained prominence as a compelling alternative to conventional leadership paradigms (Greenleaf, 1977; Spears, 2010). Servant leadership, rooted in the principles of serving others and prioritizing their needs, offers a transformative approach to leadership that emphasizes empathy, humility, and ethical decision-making (Greenleaf, 1977; Spears & Lawrence, 2002).

#### 1-2 Philosophical and Religious Roots of Servant Leadership

The emergence and evolution of servant leadership as a compelling leadership paradigm are

### Correspondence:

**Youngmi MOON**

Associate professor,  
Department of Social Welfare,  
Baekseok Arts University,  
South Korea.

deeply intertwined with philosophical and religious traditions that emphasize the moral imperative of serving others and promoting their well-being (Greenleaf, 1977; Spears & Lawrence, 2002). At its core, servant leadership draws inspiration from diverse philosophical and religious perspectives that underscore the importance of humility, compassion, and ethical conduct in leadership roles.

One of the foundational philosophical roots of servant leadership can be found in the writings of ancient Greek philosophers such as Plato and Aristotle, who advocated for the concept of leadership as a form of service to the common good (Spears & Lawrence, 2002). Plato's notion of the philosopher-king, who rules with wisdom and benevolence, resonates with the servant leadership principle of prioritizing the welfare of others over self-interest (Spears & Lawrence, 2002).

Similarly, religious traditions, particularly Christianity, have played a significant role in shaping the ethos of servant leadership (Greenleaf, 1977; Spears & Lawrence, 2002). The teachings of Jesus Christ, as recorded in the New Testament, emphasize the importance of humility, servanthood, and sacrificial love as foundational principles of leadership (Greenleaf, 1977). Jesus' example of washing his disciples' feet and his admonition to "love your neighbor as yourself" epitomize the essence of servant leadership (Greenleaf, 1977).

Furthermore, the concept of servant leadership finds resonance in other religious traditions, such as Buddhism and Hinduism, which emphasize the interconnectedness of all beings and the moral imperative of serving others (Spears & Lawrence, 2002). The Buddhist principle of "right livelihood," which advocates for ethical conduct and service to others in one's professional pursuits, aligns closely with the values espoused by servant leadership (Spears & Lawrence, 2002).

In contemporary organizational contexts, leaders who embrace servant leadership principles often draw inspiration from these philosophical and religious traditions to guide their actions and decisions (Spears & Lawrence, 2002). By grounding their leadership practices in values of humility, compassion, and ethical integrity, servant leaders seek to create environments that foster trust, collaboration, and collective well-being.

## 2. Theoretical Foundations of Servant Leadership

### 2-1 The Conceptual Framework of Servant Leadership

Servant leadership, as a theoretical framework, encompasses a distinct set of principles and characteristics that distinguish it from traditional leadership models (Greenleaf, 1977; Spears, 2010). At its core, servant leadership is predicated on the idea that effective leadership emerges from a genuine desire to serve others and prioritize their needs over self-interest (Greenleaf, 1977).

The conceptual framework of servant leadership is rooted in Robert K. Greenleaf's seminal work, where he introduced the concept in his essay "The Servant as Leader" (Greenleaf, 1977). According to Greenleaf, servant leaders are individuals who possess a deep sense of empathy, humility, and moral integrity, and who are committed to serving the needs of their followers (Greenleaf, 1977). Instead of wielding power for personal gain or prestige, servant leaders use their influence to empower others, foster growth, and promote collective well-being (Greenleaf, 1977).

Key characteristics of servant leadership include listening, empathy, healing, awareness, persuasion, conceptualization, foresight, stewardship, commitment to the growth of people, and building community (Spears, 2010). Servant leaders listen attentively to the concerns and perspectives of their followers, empathize with their experiences, and seek to address their needs and aspirations (Spears, 2010). They foster healing and reconciliation, both within individuals and within the broader organizational context, by promoting trust, understanding, and forgiveness (Spears, 2010).

Furthermore, servant leaders demonstrate a high level of self-awareness and emotional intelligence, enabling them to understand their own strengths, weaknesses, and biases, as well as the impact of their actions on others (Spears, 2010). They possess the ability to persuade and inspire others through their vision, values, and ethical convictions, thereby mobilizing collective action toward shared goals (Spears, 2010). Additionally, servant leaders engage in conceptualization and foresight, envisioning future possibilities and charting a course of action that aligns with organizational values and objectives (Spears, 2010).

Moreover, servant leaders embrace stewardship as a core principle, recognizing their responsibility to care for and nurture the resources entrusted to them, including human, financial, and environmental resources (Spears, 2010). They are committed to the growth and development of their followers, providing support, guidance, and opportunities for learning and advancement (Spears, 2010). Finally, servant leaders prioritize the building of community, fostering a sense of belonging, inclusivity, and collaboration among individuals and groups within the organization (Spears, 2010).

### 2-3 Origins and Evolution of Servant Leadership Theory

The theory of servant leadership traces its origins to the pioneering work of Robert K. Greenleaf, who introduced the concept in his essay "The Servant as Leader" published in 1970 (Greenleaf, 1970). Greenleaf's ideas represented a departure from traditional leadership paradigms that emphasized hierarchical authority and top-down decision-making, proposing instead a model of leadership grounded in service, humility, and ethical stewardship (Greenleaf, 1970).

Drawing inspiration from diverse philosophical and religious traditions, Greenleaf articulated a vision of leadership where the primary role of the leader is to serve the needs of others and facilitate their growth and development (Greenleaf, 1970). He coined the term "servant leadership" to describe this approach, highlighting the paradoxical nature of leadership where the leader's power and authority are derived from their commitment to serving others (Greenleaf, 1970).

Since its inception, the theory of servant leadership has undergone significant evolution and refinement, with scholars and practitioners exploring its implications for organizational effectiveness, employee well-being, and societal impact (Spears & Lawrence, 2002; van Dierendonck & Nuijten, 2011). The concept has gained traction in various fields, including business, education, healthcare, and non-profit organizations, as leaders seek alternative approaches to address the complexities and challenges of contemporary leadership (Spears & Lawrence, 2002; van Dierendonck & Nuijten, 2011).

In recent years, there has been a growing body of research on servant leadership, with scholars examining its antecedents, outcomes, and boundary conditions (Liden et al., 2008; van Dierendonck & Nuijten, 2011). Studies have explored the relationship between servant leadership and variables such as employee engagement, organizational citizenship behavior, and organizational performance, providing empirical support for the efficacy of servant leadership in enhancing individual and organizational outcomes (Liden et al., 2008; van Dierendonck & Nuijten, 2011).

Furthermore, scholars have extended the conceptual boundaries of servant leadership, exploring its intersections with other leadership theories and approaches (Sendjaya et al., 2008; van Dierendonck & Nuijten, 2011). Integrative models, such as the servant-leadership–follower-centered perspective, have emerged to provide a more nuanced understanding of how servant leadership operates within the broader context of leadership dynamics (Sendjaya et al., 2008).

Overall, the origins and evolution of servant leadership theory reflect a continuous process of theoretical development and empirical inquiry aimed at elucidating its underlying principles, mechanisms, and implications for leadership practice and organizational effectiveness.

### 3. Christian Spirituality: Principles and Values

#### 3-1 Overview of Christian Beliefs and Practices

Christian spirituality is deeply rooted in the teachings and traditions of Christianity, a monotheistic religion centered on the life, teachings, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ (Dyrness, 2019). Christianity, with over two billion adherents worldwide, encompasses a diverse array of denominations, traditions, and theological perspectives, each reflecting unique interpretations of sacred texts, doctrines, and rituals (Dyrness, 2019).

At the heart of Christian beliefs is the concept of God as the creator and sustainer of the universe, who is revealed to humanity through the person of Jesus Christ (Dyrness, 2019). Christians affirm the divine nature of Jesus, viewing him as the Son of God who lived a sinless life, died on the cross for the redemption of humanity, and was resurrected from the dead, offering the promise of eternal life to those who believe in him (Dyrness, 2019).

Central to Christian spirituality is the belief in the Trinity, the doctrine that God exists as three distinct persons—Father, Son, and Holy Spirit—yet is one in essence and nature (Dyrness, 2019). The Trinity serves as the foundational doctrine of Christian faith, reflecting the complex and mysterious nature of God as both transcendent and immanent, personal and relational (Dyrness, 2019).

Christian spirituality is expressed and experienced through various forms of worship, prayer, sacraments, and spiritual disciplines that cultivate intimacy with God and foster spiritual growth and transformation (Foster, 1988). Worship, whether communal or individual, involves the adoration, praise, and reverence of God, acknowledging his sovereignty, goodness, and grace (Foster, 1988).

Prayer is central to Christian spirituality, serving as a means of communication, communion, and connection with God (Foster, 1988). Christians engage in various forms of prayer, including petition, intercession, thanksgiving, and contemplation, as a way of expressing their deepest longings, needs, and aspirations to God (Foster, 1988).

The sacraments, particularly baptism and the Eucharist (or Holy Communion), hold special significance in Christian spirituality, serving as outward signs of inward grace and symbols of God's presence and redemption (Dyrness, 2019). Baptism signifies initiation into the Christian community and the forgiveness of sins, while the Eucharist commemorates the sacrificial death and resurrection of Jesus Christ (Dyrness, 2019).

Furthermore, Christian spirituality encompasses a wide range of spiritual disciplines, such as fasting, meditation, scripture reading, and service, which are designed to deepen one's relationship with God, cultivate virtues such as love, compassion, and humility, and align one's life with God's purposes and kingdom values (Foster, 1988).

#### 3-2 Core Principles of Christian Spirituality

Christian spirituality is guided by a set of core principles derived from the teachings of Jesus Christ and the broader theological tradition of Christianity (Foster, 1988; Nouwen, 2002). These principles serve as foundational values that shape the beliefs, attitudes, and behaviors of Christian believers and inform their spiritual practices and ethical conduct.

**Love:** At the heart of Christian spirituality is the principle of love, exemplified in the commandment of Jesus to "love God with all your heart, soul, and mind, and love your neighbor as yourself" (Matthew 22:37-39). Love is regarded as the supreme virtue that motivates and informs all other aspects of Christian life, fostering compassion, empathy, and self-sacrifice in relationships with God and others (Nouwen, 2002).

**Compassion:** Christian spirituality emphasizes the importance of compassion as a response to human suffering and need. Following the example of Jesus, who showed compassion to the sick, the marginalized, and the outcast, Christians are called to extend mercy, kindness, and practical assistance to those who are in need (Nouwen, 2002).

**Humility:** Humility is considered a foundational virtue in Christian spirituality, reflecting an attitude of dependence on God and recognition of one's own limitations and imperfections. Christians are called to imitate Jesus, who humbled himself and took on the form of a servant, demonstrating a willingness to serve others and prioritize their needs over personal ambition or pride (Philippians 2:5-8).

**Forgiveness:** Central to Christian spirituality is the principle of forgiveness, which reflects God's offer of grace and reconciliation to humanity through Jesus Christ. Christians are called to forgive others as they have been forgiven by God, releasing resentment, bitterness, and the desire for vengeance, and extending grace and reconciliation to those who have wronged them (Matthew 6:14-15).

**Justice:** Christian spirituality underscores the importance of justice as a moral imperative rooted in God's character and purposes. Christians are called to advocate for the rights and dignity of all people, particularly the marginalized and oppressed, and to work towards the establishment of a more just and equitable society (Micah 6:8).

**Service:** Service is a fundamental expression of Christian spirituality, reflecting Jesus' example of selfless love and sacrificial service. Christians are called to follow Jesus' example by serving others with humility, compassion, and generosity, using their gifts and resources to meet the needs

of others and advance God's kingdom purposes (Matthew 20:28).

#### 4. Examination of Shared Values and Principles

The intersection of servant leadership and Christian spirituality reveals a rich tapestry of shared values, principles, and beliefs that inform both approaches to leadership (Greenleaf, 1977; Nouwen, 2002). Rooted in the teachings of Jesus Christ and the broader Christian tradition, servant leadership and Christian spirituality converge on several key themes that shape their ethical framework and guide their practices.

**Service:** Both servant leadership and Christian spirituality emphasize the principle of service as a foundational aspect of leadership (Greenleaf, 1977; Nouwen, 2002). Servant leaders, inspired by Jesus' example of selfless service, prioritize the needs and well-being of their followers, seeking to empower, support, and nurture them for the greater good of the organization (Greenleaf, 1977). Similarly, Christian spirituality calls believers to emulate Jesus' servant-heartedness, serving others with humility, compassion, and love as a reflection of their devotion to God (Nouwen, 2002).

**Humility:** Humility is a central virtue in both servant leadership and Christian spirituality, reflecting an attitude of openness, selflessness, and dependence on God (Greenleaf, 1977; Nouwen, 2002). Servant leaders embody humility by acknowledging their own limitations, valuing the contributions of others, and prioritizing the common good over personal ambition or ego (Greenleaf, 1977). Likewise, Christian spirituality emphasizes the importance of humility as a foundational virtue, calling believers to cultivate a posture of humility in their relationships with God and others (Nouwen, 2002).

**Love and Compassion:** Love and compassion are core values shared by servant leadership and Christian spirituality, reflecting the central message of Jesus' teachings (Greenleaf, 1977; Nouwen, 2002). Servant leaders demonstrate love and compassion by showing empathy, kindness, and care for their followers, fostering environments of trust, support, and mutual respect (Greenleaf, 1977). Similarly, Christian spirituality emphasizes the primacy of love as the highest virtue, calling believers to love God and love their neighbors as themselves (Nouwen, 2002).

**Integrity and Ethics:** Both servant leadership and Christian spirituality prioritize integrity and ethical conduct as essential aspects of leadership (Greenleaf, 1977; Nouwen, 2002). Servant leaders adhere to high ethical standards, acting with honesty, transparency, and moral integrity in their interactions and decision-making processes (Greenleaf, 1977). Similarly, Christian spirituality calls believers to live lives of moral excellence, aligning their actions with the teachings of Jesus and the ethical principles of the Christian faith (Nouwen, 2002).

#### 5. Implications for Leadership Theory and Practice

##### 5-1 Integration of Christian Spiritual Values in Leadership Development

The integration of Christian spiritual values in leadership development holds significant implications for enhancing the effectiveness and ethical conduct of leaders in diverse organizational contexts (Brown & Treviño, 2006; Van Dierendonck & Patterson, 2015). By grounding leadership

development efforts in Christian principles such as love, humility, integrity, and service, organizations can cultivate leaders who are not only capable of achieving strategic objectives but also committed to serving the common good and promoting the well-being of all stakeholders.

**Formation of Character and Moral Development:** Leadership development programs that integrate Christian spiritual values focus on the formation of character and the moral development of leaders (Brown & Treviño, 2006). Through reflection, prayer, and engagement with sacred texts and spiritual practices, aspiring leaders are encouraged to cultivate virtues such as compassion, integrity, and humility, which serve as the foundation for ethical leadership (Van Dierendonck & Patterson, 2015).

**Emphasis on Servant Leadership Principles:** Christian leadership development emphasizes servant leadership principles as exemplified in the life and teachings of Jesus Christ (Brown & Treviño, 2006). Leaders are encouraged to adopt a servant-hearted approach to leadership, prioritizing the needs of others, empowering their followers, and promoting a culture of service and collaboration (Van Dierendonck & Patterson, 2015). By embodying servant leadership principles, leaders create environments where trust, respect, and ethical behavior flourish.

**Integration of Faith and Work:** Christian leadership development encourages the integration of faith and work, recognizing the sacredness of all vocations and the potential for meaningful service in every aspect of life (Brown & Treviño, 2006). Leaders are encouraged to view their work as a calling and an opportunity to express their faith through acts of service, justice, and stewardship (Van Dierendonck & Patterson, 2015). By integrating faith into their leadership practices, leaders align their actions with their deepest values and beliefs, fostering integrity and purpose in their work.

**Promotion of Ethical Leadership and Social Responsibility:** Christian leadership development emphasizes the importance of ethical leadership and social responsibility in organizational contexts (Brown & Treviño, 2006). Leaders are called to uphold ethical standards, promote justice and fairness, and advocate for the well-being of all stakeholders, especially the marginalized and vulnerable (Van Dierendonck & Patterson, 2015). By modeling ethical behavior and decision-making, leaders inspire trust and confidence among their followers and contribute to the greater good of society.

**Cultivation of Spiritual Practices and Disciplines:** Christian leadership development encourages the cultivation of spiritual practices and disciplines that nurture the inner life of leaders and sustain them in their leadership roles (Brown & Treviño, 2006). Leaders engage in practices such as prayer, meditation, worship, and fellowship to deepen their relationship with God, find guidance and wisdom, and renew their strength and resilience (Van Dierendonck & Patterson, 2015). By attending to their spiritual well-being, leaders enhance their capacity to lead with authenticity, compassion, and purpose.

##### 5-2 Suggestions for Future Research Directions

Future research in the intersection of servant leadership and Christian spirituality holds the potential to deepen our understanding of their combined impact on leadership effectiveness, organizational outcomes, and individual well-being (Chen et al., 2019; Lee et al., 2020). By

addressing key gaps in the literature and exploring emerging areas of inquiry, scholars can advance theoretical frameworks, develop practical interventions, and inform leadership practice in diverse organizational contexts.

**Exploration of Cross-Cultural Perspectives:** Future research could explore cross-cultural perspectives on servant leadership and Christian spirituality, examining how these concepts manifest and are perceived in different cultural contexts (Chen et al., 2019). Comparative studies could shed light on the cultural factors that shape leaders' adoption of servant leadership principles and the integration of Christian values in leadership development programs across diverse cultural settings (Lee et al., 2020).

**Examination of Leadership Development Interventions:** Research could investigate the effectiveness of leadership development interventions that integrate servant leadership and Christian spirituality in enhancing leadership competencies, ethical decision-making, and organizational performance (Chen et al., 2019). Longitudinal studies could assess the impact of such interventions on leaders' behaviors, followers' perceptions, and organizational outcomes over time, providing insights into their sustained effects and potential scalability (Lee et al., 2020).

**Investigation of Individual and Organizational Outcomes:** Future research could examine the individual and organizational outcomes associated with servant leadership and Christian spirituality, including employee engagement, job satisfaction, organizational commitment, and performance (Chen et al., 2019). Meta-analytic studies could synthesize findings from existing research to identify the strength and consistency of the relationships between servant leadership, Christian spirituality, and various outcome variables, helping to establish their empirical robustness (Lee et al., 2020).

**Exploration of Contingent Factors and Boundary Conditions:** Research could investigate the contingent factors and boundary conditions that moderate the relationship between servant leadership, Christian spirituality, and leadership effectiveness (Chen et al., 2019). Studies could examine how contextual variables such as organizational culture, leadership style, and follower characteristics influence the effectiveness of servant leadership behaviors and the integration of Christian values in leadership practices (Lee et al., 2020).

**Integration of Multiple Theoretical Perspectives:** Future research could explore the integration of multiple theoretical perspectives in understanding the intersection of servant leadership and Christian spirituality, such as positive psychology, moral philosophy, and organizational behavior (Chen et al., 2019). Interdisciplinary studies could illuminate the underlying mechanisms and processes through which servant leadership and Christian spirituality influence leadership outcomes, offering a more nuanced and comprehensive understanding of their combined impact (Lee et al., 2020).

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