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Charisma in Max Weber's Sociology of Religion

MARTIN RIESEBRODT

Weber's concept of *charisma* has received diverse and contradictory interpretations. The essay argues that this diversity is caused less by inadequate readings of Weber than by inconsistencies in Weber's own conceptualization. Weber introduced his concept of *charisma* in two different contexts: his political sociology and his sociology of religion. In his political sociology he formulates the ideal type of *charismatic* authority informed by R. Sohm. In his sociology of religion Weber connects it with the anthropological debate of the turn of the century on magic and religion, especially the debate on pre-animism initiated by R. R. Marett, and uses it as an alternative for concepts like *mana* or *orenda*. Both conceptualizations of *charisma* are located on quite different levels of abstraction, which Weber has not sufficiently clarified and systematized. This leads to inconsistencies, contradictions, and overgeneralizations. Especially problematic is his claim of a supposedly anti-traditionalist or even revolutionary character of *charisma*. The article argues that while this claim may apply to certain types of *charisma* under specific conditions, many types of *charisma* actually seem to be integral parts of institutionalized and traditionalized social orders.

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Max Weber's concept of *charisma* is probably one of the more popular concepts coined by a sociologist. This is surprising since sociological concepts are generally regarded as either irrelevant or incomprehensible by non-specialists. There is, however, a downside to such fame and fortune. When popularized, concepts usually lose their theoretical precision and philosophical depth, a destiny shared by Marx' 'alienation', Durkheim's 'anomie', as well as the subject of this paper, Weber's concept of *charisma*.

In our everyday language, *charisma* has become a rather meaningless catchword. Any politician, actor, sports hero, or musician may be called *charismatic*. But this banalization is not limited to the popular usage of *charisma*. The concept has also undergone a similar process of trivialization in academic discourse. For some writers *charisma* designates any kind of motivational force through which superiors make their employees work extra hours, even if this takes place in a widely bureaucratized organization. Others equate *charisma* with popularity. Even the obviously manufactured images of powerful, competent, or creative personalities by mass media have been understood in such terms. Bryan Wilson has discussed examples of such uses in a somewhat overlooked but most interesting book.¹ In this book, he also offers a convincing explanation for the present popularity of *charisma* and for its trivialization:

The new application of the concept appears . . . to be an attempt to reassert faith in the individual, implying an area of operation for human free will, which mitigates the inexorability of the system by the deployability of unconstrained and uncontracted personality attributes. To suggest that it is *charisma*—not science or rational procedures—which really makes the wheels go round, is to resuscitate an emphasis on the individual. . . .²

In other words, for Wilson, the concept of *charisma* in its casual or even banal usage is popular for similar reasons as the ubiquitous invocation of 'agency', with its diffuse connotations of 'people making their own history' and 'free will', is presently fashionable.

Although it would be entertaining to look at some examples of trivial sociological theorizing, it is much more worthwhile to turn to scholarly uses of the concept which

are interesting and challenging. Here one confronts an enormous variety of interpretations of the concept. Some see *charisma* as a disruptive, potentially revolutionary force in human history, a force which represents the creativity and power of human action and imagination, a force which—at least under certain circumstances—is capable of transforming seemingly rigid social structures. This view, which links *charisma* directly to heroic leadership, has been supported most notably by Guenther Roth³ and more recently by Hans Joas.⁴

Other authors have offered opposite interpretations. Edward Shils⁵ and, following him to a certain extent Shmuel Eisenstadt⁶ have equated *charisma* not with change but with the ‘center’, the ‘sacred’ in the Durkheimian sense, or even with the ‘holy’ as understood by Rudolf Otto.⁷ At first glance, this represents a rather surprising interpretation since Weber himself called *charisma* a revolutionary force, contrasting it to ‘the sacred’ as the ‘uniquely unalterable’.⁸ Some interpreters, recognizing inconsistencies in Weber’s uses of *charisma*, have either attempted to mediate between these two positions or to systematize Weber’s writings on *charisma*.⁹

This apparent confusion about *charisma* is worth clarifying, since the concept is so widely used and can actually be a powerful tool for sociological analysis when precisely defined, as Rainer Lepsius has recently proven.¹⁰ Such a clarification can start from two opposite presuppositions. One, we can assume that the concept as defined by Weber himself is internally consistent. The scholarly confusion would then stem from deficient interpretations and a lack of contextualization, and would therefore only need proper systematization. Or, alternatively, we can assume that Weber himself insufficiently defined and systematized the notion. The task would then be to examine the origins and causes of the inherent inconsistencies. My essay will show that the latter is the case, and that contradictory interpretations of *charisma* by various authors reveal and accentuate inconsistencies already present in Weber’s writings.

Towards a Contextualization of Charisma

My central argument is that Weber developed the concept of *charisma* in two different contexts but never sufficiently clarified their different meanings, implications and levels of abstraction. On the one hand in his sociology of domination Weber contrasts different principles of legitimacy. He defines *charisma* as a specific type of authority that in its pure form is based not on vested interests or on force, but solely on a belief in the special empowerment of a person. Here, Weber claims to build on Rudolf Sohm’s famous book on ecclesiastical law.¹¹

On the other hand Weber makes *charisma* the central concept in his sociology of religion. Here he does not rely on Sohm but on the anthropological debate on magic and religion in anthropology, especially on the preanimistic theory of Robert R. Marett,¹² thereby linking *charisma* to concepts like *mana* and *orenda*. This move broadens the concept considerably beyond the context of authority.

Thus far, few scholars have made attempts at the historical contextualization of Weber’s concept of *charisma*, and unfortunately, these have been either misleading or incomplete. Most interpretations have simply ignored the historical context of the concept and have focused on Weber’s supposed ‘personal longing’ for a *charismatic* leader. For example, Charles Lindholm, in a book entitled *Charisma*¹³, offers interesting parallels between the writings of Weber and other *fin de siècle* social theorists on masses and leaders, but devotes less than five pages to the interpretation of *charisma* in Weber’s own writings. Instead, he explains Weber simplistically by referring to Nietzsche. Lindholm argues: ‘Max Weber . . . accepts with little alteration Nietzsche’s basic

assertion of the willful genius who is regarded as the font of human feeling and of creativity'.¹⁴ This interpretation clearly contradicts Weber's assertion that 'personality' is based on dedication to a cause, and on ethical consistency.

More astute interpreters who have attempted to systematize Weber's concept of *charisma* have noticed some inconsistencies.¹⁵ But, as far as I know, they have not related these problems to the discrepancy between Weber's twofold reliance on Sohm's notion of *charisma* and the debate on magic in British anthropology. Moreover, those who have accurately referred to Rudolf Sohm also have not paid much attention to Weber's considerable modifications of Sohm's conceptualization of *charisma*. Weber smuggles certain features into his own concept of *charisma* which are not only in clear contrast to Sohm's but, more important, create serious systematic problems. The one-sided focus on Sohm has also led many interpreters to treat Weber's concept of *charisma* as if it were identical with *charismatic authority*. However, this confusion is only possible when one ignores the opening paragraphs of Weber's sociology of religion. Here *charisma* refers to a much more general phenomenon than *charismatic authority*, namely, to a concept of often depersonalized powers assumed to be at the core of beliefs in magic and fetishism. With the exception of Winckelmann¹⁶ and Breuer,¹⁷ most interpreters have overlooked Weber's references to this anthropological discussion.

Given these and other shortcomings of existing interpretations, it seems obvious that in order to come closer to an adequate understanding of *charisma* we have to contextualize historically the term and explore more carefully the contexts of its appropriation by Weber. Since some authors have contributed to this task already, I can abstain here from a broader historical analysis locating *charisma* in debates of the 'heroic' in Western modernity from Carlyle to Nietzsche and Sorel.¹⁸ I also do not deal with the related topic of leaders and masses or the parallels drawn by many authors—most obviously by Freud—between modern masses and primitive crowds, between modern and 'primitive' irrationalism, which connect the debate on primitive religion with the modern social psychology of mass behavior.¹⁹ Instead, I will stay close to Weber's concept and attempt to locate it in the turn-of-the century literature.

Although Robertson²⁰ has convincingly argued that one should interpret Weber's writings on religion in the German context of Hegel and Marx, Troeltsch and Simmel, this perspective is better suited to an understanding of Weber's general approach to religion than to a contextualization of *charisma*. For the latter, one has to turn to anthropological debates on religion, magic and *mana* in Great Britain, Tylor, Frazer, and Marett;²¹ in France, Durkheim²² and Mauss²³; and in Germany, Wundt²⁴ and Preuss.²⁵ It is especially Marett's theory of pre-animism, based on the concepts of *mana* and *tabu*, however, which provided the major source for Weber's broader conceptualization of *charisma*. It is amazing that this connection to British anthropology is totally absent in a volume on 'Max Weber and his Contemporaries'.²⁶ Only one out of 37 essays in this collection deals with a British 'contemporary' of Weber, John Stuart Mill, who was his senior by fifty-eight years.

Before addressing the anthropological debate, I will turn to an extremely interesting implicit historical contextualization of *charisma* presented by Shils.²⁷ Shils reads *charisma* as if it were a synthesis between Durkheim's concept of the 'sacred' and Otto's concept of the 'holy'. Although this is ultimately misleading, Shils' interpretation, which basically follows Parsons,²⁸ offers an excellent starting point for the clarification of the issues at stake.

Durkheim and Otto: Charisma as ‘Sacred Center’

Shils’ interpretation of *charisma* is as stimulating as it is problematic. Responding to the inconsistent use of the concept in Weber’s own writings, Shils decides to focus on the institutionalized form of *charisma* and ignores the innovative, anti-institutional aspects. Linking it to his notion of center and periphery, he places *charisma* firmly at the center of society, any society.

Shils defines *charisma* as ‘the quality which is imputed to persons, actions, roles, institutions, symbols, and material objects because of their presumed connection with “ultimate”, “fundamental”, “vital”, order-determining powers’.²⁹ He furthermore draws a distinction between what he calls ‘extraordinary *charisma*’ and its ‘intense and concentrated form’ on the one hand, and ‘attenuated and dispersed *charisma*’ and its ‘normal form’ on the other.³⁰ In other words, Shils reverses Weber’s perspective on *charisma*, by declaring untypical what Weber called ‘genuine’ *charisma* and typical what he regarded as the institutionalized but no longer ‘pure’ forms of *charisma*. Moreover, whereas *charisma* for Weber was a category which often originated at the social periphery, Shils makes it the property of the center and declares it to be a response to the ‘need for order’. In the end, any concentration of great power automatically creates the aura of *charisma* according to Shils: ‘Corporate bodies—secular, economic, governmental, military, and political—come to possess *charismatic* qualities simply by virtue of the *tremendous* power concentrated in them.’³¹

Whatever one thinks of this thesis, it is obvious that Shils transforms the category of *charisma* as introduced and used by Weber, by fusing it with the ‘sacred’ as introduced by Durkheim and with ‘the holy’ as defined by Rudolf Otto. Shils’ curious synthesis of Durkheim and Otto is easy to detect. Following Parsons’ interpretation of Durkheim, Shils, in his famous ‘Center and Periphery’, defines the ‘center’ as follows:

The center, or the central zone, is a phenomenon of the realm of values and beliefs. It is the center of the order of symbols, of values and beliefs, which govern the society. It is the ultimate and irreducible; and it is felt to be such by many who cannot give explicit articulation to its irreducibility. The central zone partakes of the nature of the sacred.³²

In his later writings, Shils more or less replaces the category of the sacred by what he calls ‘dispersed and attenuated’ *charisma*. Here *charisma* becomes a category of sacred order.³³ It is obvious that Shils primarily conceptualizes *charisma* in a Durkheimian frame as he understands it and then superimposes a Weberian terminology. The impact of Otto on these formulations is equally obvious. It is the concentration of power which makes one experience it as sacred, as *tremendum fascinans*. Moreover, Shils explicitly refers to Otto when he talks about the sacredness of the center:

The most fundamental laws of a country, its constitution, its most unchallengeable traditions and the institutions embodying or enunciating them, call forth awe in the minds of those in contact with them; they arouse the sense of *tremendum mysteriosum* which Rudolf Otto designated as the central property of the ‘idea of the holy’.³⁴

This reference to Otto is no accident since Shils counts him among the scholars who have exerted the greatest influence on him.³⁵ This cocktail of Durkheim and Otto—one should probably also add Mircea Eliade and Talcott Parsons—finally enters Shils’ ‘redefinition of *charisma*’ as ‘awe-arousing centrality’.³⁶

Whatever its contribution may be, this interpretation of *charisma* is informed by an agenda quite different from Weber’s and actually reverses it. For Weber, sacrality was not a simple effect of the concentration of power but the result of a historical discursive

process of creating and spreading beliefs in legitimacy. Shils' interpretation also moves *charisma* from the periphery to the center, from its disruptive potential to its ordering potential. *Charisma* becomes intentionally dehistoricized in Shils' writings³⁷ which causes major problems for a consistent interpretation of Weber's oeuvre. *Charisma* according to this reading, hardly lends itself to a theory of revolutionary change. Even more important, a very central feature of Weber's theory of Western rationalization, namely the disenchantment of the world, loses its meaning.

Moreover, for Weber, the distinguishing feature of humans as cultural beings ('*Kulturmenschentum*') was characterized by reflexivity, not by awe vis-à-vis sacred institutions or tradition. Whereas Weber uses *charisma* as an analytical category for the understanding of a certain type of authority which works on the basis of beliefs alone, Shils broadens it into a concept which refers to the necessarily mystifying quality of all kinds of power, authority, and social order.

There is an interesting move in Shils' link between *charisma* and the 'awe' arousing property of power. However, it is not Rudolf Otto who helps us to better understand this relationship in Weber, but rather Robert R. Marett, the Oxford anthropologist. Before I turn to him, I will, however, first examine in more detail Weber's reliance on Rudolf Sohm, the German legal historian.

Rudolf Sohm: Charisma as Prophetic Gifts of Grace

Most scholars who have dealt with the origins of the concept of *charisma* in Weber have focused on Rudolf Sohm's '*Kirchenrecht*' ('Ecclesiastical Law') published in 1892.³⁸ They have done so with good reason because Weber himself repeatedly refers to Sohm as his source. When introducing the concept of *charisma* in his sociology of legitimate authority Weber writes: 'The concept of "*charisma*" ("the gift of grace") is taken from the vocabulary of early Christianity. For the Christian hierocracy Rudolf Sohm, in his *Kirchenrecht*, was the first to clarify the substance of the concept, even though he did not use the same terminology.'³⁹ In the chapter on 'the sociological nature of charismatic authority' Weber writes:

It is to Rudolf Sohm's credit that he worked out the sociological character of this kind of domination; however, since he developed this category with regard to one historically important case—the rise of the ecclesiastical authority of the early Christian church—this treatment was bound to be one-sided from the viewpoint of historical diversity.⁴⁰

When one actually reads Sohm, which few interpreters seem to have done, and compares his concept of *charisma* with Weber's ideal type of *charismatic authority*, two things immediately catch the eye. On the one hand it is surprising how much Weber owes to Sohm, and how closely he follows Sohm's analysis in most respects. On the other hand it is striking how Weber modifies Sohm's analytical framework in one very specific respect, and thereby creates a certain inconsistency within the definition of *charisma* and the attributes of *charismatic authority*. Therefore, a brief reconstruction of Sohm's model of *charismatic organization* will help us to understand Weber's specific conceptualization of *charisma*.

Rudolf Sohm's analysis of early Christianity is informed by a typically Protestant theological agenda and attempts to show that Catholicism represents a fundamental break with the principles of original Christianity.⁴¹ Original Christianity, according to Sohm, can be characterized as a 'charismatic organization'. What does this mean? First of all, this notion is based on an opposition between church and state, between theocracy and worldly domination. Associating true Christianity with the invisible

church, Sohm claims that the true church cannot be based on human law and organization but only on divine guidance. Accordingly, the very notion of an ecclesiastical law contradicts the essence of Christianity.

Arguing against Harnack and Hatch,⁴² Sohm claims that in the early church there were no purely administrative offices in congregations. The whole organization was based on charismatically inspired doctrine. Early Christianity was not a club like other religious associations but was based on the idea of 'ecclesia', which, according to Sohm, refers not to official membership in a local club but to membership in an invisible universal church. Each congregation therefore represents the assembly of Christianity as a whole, with Christ as the head of the 'ecclesia'. Authority in the 'ecclesia' can only be exerted in the name of Christ, not in the name of any man-made law. Nothing has authority over the 'ecclesia' but the word of God. It is up to the 'ecclesia' to recognize it through free consent by its inner power. The 'ecclesia' is not based not on legal-human organization but on charismatic-divine organization.

Accordingly, the organization of the church is based on an unequal distribution of gifts of grace (*charismata*) within the 'ecclesia'. Every true membership, as every office, is based on *charisma*. Authority is based on the recognition of an unequal distribution of *charisma* and God given superordination and subordination. There is no legal obligation, however, to render such recognition. 'To have a *charisma* means to have the spirit of God', writes Sohm.⁴³

There exists only one *charisma*, which all true Christians have part to different degrees, and whose highest expression is the leadership of the congregation through teaching. The *charisma* of teaching God's word is the highest *charisma* with which only few are endowed: the apostles, the prophets, and the teachers in the narrower sense of the word.

There exist three kinds of teaching functions within the 'ecclesia'. Prophecy is the new revelation of God's word in an ecstatic or enthusiastic mode, through which questions of congregational organization or personal problems are addressed. Interpretation consists of the explication of revealed truth through which the congregational life is organized. Admonition refers to the correction of individual conduct.

Apostles serve all three functions but cannot stay in any congregation for more than two days. Prophets are endowed with pneumatic speech, which is lacking in regular teachers. Regular teachers mainly admonish the congregation to uphold the doctrinal and moral tradition. All three kinds of teachers are dispensed from manual work and entertained by the congregations.

Since the teachers claim divine inspiration, they demand obedience from the congregation. The congregation in turn only obeys the teachers when it recognizes this divine inspiration. This fact again shows that these teachers do not have any legal power to speak with authority. It is not the congregation but only individuals who are carriers of *charisma*. Therefore the congregation does not have the power to bestow *charisma* on a person. It can only render or refuse recognition whenever such claims are made by individuals. Accordingly, charismatic organization is not based on democratic ideals but on theocratic, authoritarian ones, as Sohm repeatedly insists, nor is it based on the notion of office: 'The leadership of the ecclesia comes from above through the individual personality endowed by God'.⁴⁴

In other words, there is no office endowed with *charisma* in the early church but only individuals who fulfill certain functions because their *charisma* has been recognized by the congregation. There is not only an absence of ecclesiastical law but also an absence of financial organization and administration of the ecclesiastical wealth. All these

organizational features, according to Sohm, are of a later development which introduces bureaucratic structures of authority and organization.

Weber follows Sohm closely in all these essential respects. *Charisma*, is contrasted to organization and administration. It knows neither legal regulation nor economic rationality. Weber also emphasizes with Sohm the relational features of *charisma*. Only the recognition of *charismatic* gifts in an actor creates authority and obedience; there are no legal sanctions.⁴⁵ Obedience is, however, demanded because of the shared belief that the leader is endowed with gifts of grace by God, and therefore one actually obeys God when one obeys the leader. Although the congregation controls who may speak with authority, the congregation itself as a superindividual communal unit is not *charismatically* endowed. Only individuals can be endowed with *charisma*. The congregation can only recognize it. Weber also follows Sohm's analysis of the process of routinization and bureaucratization of *charisma*. Sohm's story of the development of the Catholic church out of the early Christian 'ecclesia' is actually a highly analytic description of the transformation of *charismatic authority* into a bureaucratic organization. Even Weber's famous concept of a *charisma of office* can already be found in Sohm: 'Once the office (the *διακονία* one provided for the ecclesia) rested on charisma. Now, in reverse, charisma rests on the office'⁴⁶ (my translation).

There exist therefore many good reasons other than Weber's direct references that interpreters of *charisma*,⁴⁷ have referred back to Sohm. However, this exclusive focus on Sohm has two shortcomings. First of all, most interpreters have not really compared Weber with Sohm, and, consequently, it has gone widely unnoticed how Weber actually modifies Sohm's definition of *charismatic* organization. Second, Weber moves back and forth between a very narrow and a rather broad understanding of *charisma*. Interpreters apparently have overlooked the fact that only his narrower concept of *charismatic* authority is derived from Sohm, while his more general concept of *charisma* is not.

Let us turn first to Weber's modification of Sohm, which primarily lies in his characterization of *charisma* as an anti-traditionalist or even revolutionary force,⁴⁸ a notion widely missing in Sohm. First of all, in Sohm, all true believers as individual members of an invisible church are to a certain degree *charismatically* endowed, which enables them to recognize true *charisma* in others. In a *charismatic* organization the distribution of *charisma* is a matter of degree not of kind. Second, there are different modes of expressing this *charismatic* gift—prophecy, teaching, admonition and conduct—but they all belong together. Even a person who is endowed with the gift of pneumatic speech will follow the already established dogmatic tradition when it comes to teaching, reminding and admonishing people of moral conduct, and exhibiting such moral conduct oneself. Although prophetic speech is a new revelation of the divine word, it is not supposed to contradict established teachings, but to extend God's word to dimensions of group life not already covered by formerly revealed truth. Weber's repetitive reference to Jesus' saying that 'It is written, but I say unto you', as paradigmatic for the anti-traditional, revolutionary nature of *charisma* cannot be found in Sohm's work, where teaching is embedded in communal structures and where *charismatic* gifts have to be recognized by the community. Peter Berger has actually noticed and corrected this exaggeration in Weber's treatment of Israelite prophecy by showing the social embeddedness of the prophets.⁴⁹

Weber isolates one specific feature of Sohm's description of the prophet, detaches it from the doctrinal, moral and communal context and its historical continuity, and downplays the material as well as spiritual dependency of the prophet on the congregation. Through this isolation of one feature, Weber creates the ideal type of

charismatic authority, with its characterization as an anti-traditionalist, potentially revolutionary force.

Lepsius has accurately identified four essential features in Weber's description of *charismatic* authority as a specific type of social relationship which reflects this modification of Sohm: first, the voluntary recognition of the *charisma* of the leader by the subjects; second, the dissolution of certain existing normative standards, procedures and organizational forms; third, the formation of a community based on emotional attachment to the leader; and finally, the necessity of proof and success in the eyes of the followers for the preservation of the belief in the leader's *charisma*.⁵⁰

This precise systematization leads us directly to the problems in Weber's modification and generalization of Sohm's concept of *charisma*. On the one hand Weber includes all kinds of heroic or ecstatic actors in the concept (e.g., shamans, berserks, war heroes and magicians). On the other hand he links *charisma* to other concepts like *mana* and *orenda*. These extensions of the concept make it even more obvious that Weber's emphasis on the anti-traditionalist or even revolutionary character of *charisma* is a highly problematic move, since it generalizes a very particular feature which is at best latent in most of the relationships he characterizes as *charismatic*. What does the anti-traditionalism of a shaman consist of? What kind of authority is created by a fetish? Magical *charisma*, by requiring no changes in 'inner' attitudes, seems to be part of traditionalism rather than its antithesis. One could argue that *charisma* is the only force in traditional societies which has the potential of being anti-traditional or even revolutionary. In general, however, it is more often part of the tradition than it is anti-traditionalist.

By making such general but often misleading claims about the nature of *charisma*, which if at all are only true for certain types and forms of *charisma* under certain historical circumstances, Weber creates considerable confusion, which finds its expression in the secondary literature. This leads us to the next point, Weber's attempt to link *charisma* to anthropological debates on magic and religion at the turn of the century.

Robert R. Marett: Charisma as Mana

Instead of turning to Durkheim and Otto, as Shils has suggested, I propose to turn to the debate on magic and religion in British anthropology in order to better understand the concept of *charisma* as used by Weber. Weber's conceptualization of *charisma* was influenced by Marett's theory of pre-animism and its emphasis on 'mana'. Although I can not actually prove that Weber read Marett, it is obvious that he knew his work at least through secondary literature. Let us first turn to direct indications of such a connection in Weber's texts.

Unlike Sohm, Weber never mentions Marett by name. He does, however, refer both to pre-animism and to the concept of *mana*. On several occasions Weber equates *charisma* with terms like *mana*, *orenda* and *maga*.⁵¹ Referring to intellectualist judgements about the rationality or irrationality of magical practices à la Frazer, Weber comments:

Quite a different distinction will be made by the person performing the magical act, who will instead distinguish between the greater or lesser ordinariness of the phenomenon in question. For example, not every stone can serve as a fetish, a source of magical power. Nor does every person have the capacity to achieve the ecstatic states which are viewed, in accordance with primitive experience, as the pre-conditions for producing certain effects in meteorology, healing, divination, and telepathy. It is primarily, though not exclusively, these extraordinary powers that have been designated by such special terms as "mana", "orenda", and the Iranian "maga" (the term from which our word "magic" is derived). And he adds: 'We shall henceforth employ the term *charisma* for such extraordinary powers.'⁵²

Elsewhere Weber repeats the reference to *maga* and *orenda* when he states that Charisma was always an extraordinary force (*maga*, *orenda*) and was revealed in sorcery and heroism.⁵³

Although these concepts of *mana* and *orenda* were used widely by other authors such as Preuss⁵⁴ and Wundt⁵⁵ in Germany and Mauss⁵⁶ in France, it was Marett who made *mana*—or, even more precisely, the ‘*tabu-mana* formula’ which in turn attempts to capture the ambivalence of the French *sacré*—the center of a theory of religion and magic. Marett also refers in his writings not only to *mana* but also to *orenda*, as in his essay ‘The Conception of Mana’ and in his essay on ‘Primitive Religion’,⁵⁷ creating exactly the same connection between these terms as Weber does.

Even more important, Weber explicitly refers to the theory of ‘pre-animism’. In his ‘Sociology of Religion’ he writes: ‘The strong naturalistic orientation (lately termed “pre-animistic”) of the earliest religious phenomena is still a feature of folk religion.’⁵⁸ In his study of China, he refers to it as well: ‘It is impossible to distinguish strictly between “charm” and non-charm in the world of pre-animist and animist ideas.’⁵⁹

Although the theory of ‘pre-animism’ had wide currency and like *mana* could be found in the writings of many anthropologists and even psychologists, the first person to employ it was Marett. Marett coined this term in a famous lecture on ‘Pre-animistic Religion’ in 1899, which was published in the subsequent year as an article.⁶⁰ Marett also published his theory in a German journal with which Weber was certainly familiar, since he was the editor of a different journal produced by the same publisher.⁶¹

Besides these direct thematic and terminological links of Weber’s sociology of religion and Marett’s writings, there are other similarities between the approaches of these authors. Although siding with Frazer rather than Marett in his characterization of ‘primitive’ religion as rather rational and this-worldly, Weber begins his explorations into the world of ‘elementary’ religion with several theoretically significant moves. Most important, Weber treats magic and religion as one complex, not as two essentially different phenomena. Whereas for Tylor, Frazer and Durkheim, magic and religion are clearly distinct, Marett in his 1904 essay ‘From Spell to Prayer’⁶² criticized Frazer for his dissociation of religion and magic and claimed that they both belong together psychologically, at least in these early stages of religion, a claim confirmed by Weber.

Furthermore, Weber, like Marett, views the dichotomy between the quotidian and the extra-quotidian as crucial to the definition of religion. Both see religious evolution as a process of increasing ethicization, rationalization and individualization which breaks the fetters of tradition, custom and conventions. Here it is also significant that Marett’s and Weber’s notion of ‘awe’ are quite different from Otto’s. For both Marett and Weber, ‘the holy’ as well as ‘awe’ human response to it are certainly not given *a priori* but socially and culturally constructed. Marett frequently refers to the bull-roarer as an example of an ‘artificial’ and ‘superstitious’ method for the creation of ‘awe’.⁶³

How does this placement of *charisma* in the context of the British (maybe also French?) debate on elementary religion and magic change our reading of Weber? First of all, it requires us to distinguish more clearly between the general concept of *charisma* and *charismatic authority* as a specific instantiation of *charisma*. Not all types of *charisma* can serve as a basis for authority and have anti-traditionalist or even revolutionary effects. For example, while a fetish might be called a *charismatic* object, it does not exert authority, create followers or stimulate any innovation. Moreover, connecting *charisma* to the debate on pre-animistic religion urges us to distinguish more precisely and systematically among different types of *charisma*, the various types of social structures in which they are embedded, the range of effects they produce on these

structures, and the variety of ways in which they are understood, produced and institutionalized.

As we have seen in Sohm's analytical description of early Christianity, even prophetic *charisma* does not necessarily have revolutionary effects but can be rather designed to extend the tradition. This point seems even more true for most types of *charisma* debated in anthropological contexts. Instead of challenging the existing tradition, *charisma* rather represents an integral part of the traditional order. A famous example is Victor Turner's study of the ritual process, in which 'communitas' represents a *charismatic* but nevertheless highly institutionalized transitional stage through which a traditionalist society reproduces itself.⁶⁴

Weber's broader conceptualization of *charisma* in his sociology of religion and its connection with the anthropological debate at the turn of the century, also challenge different theses regarding the transformations of *charisma*. For example, Schluchter's distinction between a structural process of routinization and a historical-developmental process of depersonalization,⁶⁵ or Breuer's notion of a transformation of magical into religious *charisma*,⁶⁶ has to be reconsidered.

In the debate on *mana* and magic at the turn of the century, the nonpersonal character of magical powers was stressed not only by Marett but also by Durkheim and Mauss.⁶⁷ Weber himself affirms this quality by noticing that *charisma* can also inhere in an object.⁶⁸ Therefore to claim a historical trend from personal to depersonalized forms is to ignore the assertion of these earlier thinkers concerning the depersonalized original forms of *charisma*. The trend towards depersonalization observed by Schluchter is preceded by a trend towards personalization, according to those theories.

Furthermore, even when personal *charisma* predominates, the fact that *charisma* can be gained and lost—as Weber repeatedly points out—proves that from the followers' point of view it is a kind of magical power which is essentially distinct from the person.

Charisma as a foundation of social relationships is essentially based on magical thinking. Although Weber distinguishes between magical and religious *charisma*,⁶⁹ as Breuer has correctly pointed out, this distinction seems to refer primarily to the self-understanding of virtuosi and to the ways that the possession of *charisma* is proven. However, as far as a specific relationship is concerned, *charisma* seems to be essentially magical. For example, how an ethical prophet understands himself and how he is perceived by his followers can vary considerably according to Weber. Although the primary missions of the ethical prophets are doctrine and/or commandments, they all can hardly do without magic and often see themselves as carriers of magical *charisma*: '... it was only under very unusual circumstances that a prophet succeeded in establishing his authority without charismatic authentication, which in practices meant magic. ... It must not be forgotten for an instant that the entire basis of Jesus' own legitimation ... was the magical charisma he felt in himself.'⁷⁰

Moreover, according to Weber, it is the specific quality of the relationship between leader and followers that defines and constitutes *charisma*. Sociologically, *charisma* is based not on the self-understanding of the leader but always on the beliefs of the followers, which tend to be magical. Even the religious virtuosi are, in the eyes of the followers, endowed with a special magical power to be virtuous. Here Shils certainly has a point when he argues that the sheer concentration of power in a person or an institution can create awe and deference. Even rigorous ethical conduct can provide a person with a magical aura in the perception of the followers. This view, however, makes highly problematic the working out of evolutionary or developmental models based on a transition from magical to religious *charisma* because, rather than representing a new

stage, the transformation of magical into religious *charisma* seems to be part of the process of disenchantment.

Weber argues, furthermore, that in the modern West, science and reason can be understood and used by 'the laity' in magical terms. This view seems to support the thesis of the depersonalization of *charisma* for this historical period but at the same time sheds doubt on the thesis of a transition from magical to religious *charisma*. Rather, it points towards the possible perseverance of magical thinking, also under modern Western conditions. However, even the claim of a historical-developmental trend towards depersonalization is confronted with dramatic counter-evidence. For decades, we have witnessed the eruption of highly personalized *charismatic* religious movements not only outside of the West but even in the United States, the most radically economically rationalized capitalist Western country.

In the face of all these contradictory trends, it becomes highly problematic to describe the trajectory of *charisma* in terms of a linear development and 'stages', be they based on an evolutionary model of socioeconomic and political differentiation or on a developmental model of the West. This is not to say that these models are not legitimate attempts at systematizing Weber's writings, but there is an inherent temptation to reify such models and ignore contradictory trends. Also, they lend themselves less to the stimulation of new questions and research agendas than to the subsumption of a case into a given model.

However, there is one structural change within *charisma* described by Weber which seems much more theoretically fruitful to me than depersonalization or transition from magical to religious forms. According to Weber, in modern politics, *charisma* becomes democratized and is transformed into ascribed *charisma*.⁷¹ To me, this seems to be the real structural change underlying disenchantment in Weber, which also explains the trivialization of *charisma* I have pointed out in the beginning of this article.

This transition from recognized to ascribed *charisma* is admittedly sometimes difficult to verify empirically. Nevertheless, I argue that it is this distinction which opens up a promising theoretical perspective on the transformation of the conditions for the production of *charisma*. It is also of special interest for the study of the role of modern mass media as specialists in the production of magical illusions, and perfecting the art of ascribing *charisma* to objects and people—a trend which, of course, corresponds closely with the modern trivialization and banalization of *charisma* in everyday language as well as academic discourse.

Charisma in Weber's *Sociology of Religion*

Weber's interest in religion is obviously very selective. His primary interest lies in the contribution of religion to ethical rationalization. Therefore, he neither defines religion, nor does he offer a theory of religion. Weber states: 'To define "religion", to say what it *is*, is not possible at the start of a presentation such as this. Definition can be attempted, if at all, only at the conclusion of the study. The essence of religion is not even our concern, as we make it our task to study the conditions and effects of a particular type of social action'.⁷²

Nevertheless, Weber obviously works with an implicit definition and theory of religion based on the concept of *charisma* and its transformation. Breuer and Schluchter, among others, have offered two interesting models for how to systematize Weber's approach. Driven by an interest based less in classification than in an empirical-historical and comparative sociology of religion, I would like to propose a different option for how to work with the concept.

Roth, in describing Weber's methods, draws a distinction between 'socio-historical model' and 'secular (i.e., developmental) theory'. What is the difference? Roth writes: 'The models . . . provide us with generalized experiences for the study of past, present, and future, while secular theory attempts the explanation of the rise and fall of major historical configurations'.⁷³

These distinctions seem quite helpful for our task of (re-)constructing Weber's implicit theory of religion. The key here is the concept of *charisma*. As I see it, *charisma* is a general term which simply refers to any belief in extraordinary, superhuman powers residing in people or objects. As such, *charisma* does not represent a 'socio-historical model', although I suspect that some may have read it as such. Nevertheless, any reconstruction of Weber's implicit theory of religion would have to start with the formulation of 'socio-historical models' of different types of *charisma* from magical *charisma* to prophetic *charisma* to the *charisma* of reason; from genuine to acquired to ascribed *charisma*, etc.

Accordingly, I propose to read Weber's sociology of religion as offering an insufficiently systematized sequence of such models where the meaning of *charisma* changes from one type to the next, as do the methods of acquiring *charisma* and the characteristics of carriers of *charisma* and mediators, customers and followers, rituals and everyday practices. In contrast to Breuer and Schluchter, I would shift the emphasis from a more-or-less exclusive focus on the central institutions to a more systematic description of the religious field as a whole. Whereas the developmental models provide us with neat stages of transition from one type of *charisma* to the next, this strategy leads us to a recognition of a variety of charismatic claims on different levels of social aggregation, made by different social groups and categories of people. Thus 'orthodoxy' and 'orthopraxy' are always presented in relationship to 'heterodoxy' and 'heteropraxy'. The 'center' is always seen in relationship to the 'periphery'. Contradictions and inconsistencies are not levelled in favour of a homogeneous picture. Ideal-types are not reified into models of reality.

We obtain a glimpse of such an analysis of the religious field in Weber's *Ancient Judaism*, where he describes and contrasts the old ecstatic war prophets and pre-exilic prophets, while comparing the latter also to Hellenic prophecy.⁷⁴ Weber not only presents us with an historical transition from one type of prophecy to another, but also embeds this typological change in a rich description of the changing dynamics of the religious field in the context of major political, economic, and demographic transformation processes. Throughout his writings, Weber is careful to not isolate the analysis of typological transitions from the actual historical and political struggles of social groups, classes and strata. Accordingly, a (re-)construction of Weber's historical theory of religion had to be based on a developmental theory, not of changing types of *charisma* but of the changing dynamics of major historical configurations of *charismata* in competition. Since Weber does not assume a universal evolutionist model of historical transformation but a cultural-historical model, there necessarily exists a plurality of such configurations and their transformation.

By employing this reading of Weber, one could actually mobilize his theoretical and methodological potential against his own usage of it. Weber's conscious choice of Western rationalization as the main perspective for his intellectual agenda has also shaped his concepts. The approach recommended here, however, uses Weber's cultural-historical method to re-direct the study of religion away from a perspective focused on Western uniqueness, rationalization and disenchantment and towards an analysis of the processes of globalization and pluralization of religion as well as the re-enchantment of the world.

Notes

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