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Edited by Olav Hammer, Mikael Rothstein

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5 Charismatic leaders in new religions

CATHERINE WESSINGER

Charismatic leadership is a common, but not a necessary, characteristic of a “new religious movement,” understood here as a religion that is either emergent or alternative in a given cultural context. Emergent movements arise from within old traditions, or represent innovative combinations of characteristics from different traditions. Alternative religions include old religious traditions, which are revived, rediscovered or transplanted to a new cultural context. Although charismatic leadership is often associated with new and unconventional movements, charismatic religious leadership and charismatic political leadership go back to the origins of human religious creativity.

Charismatic religious leadership appears to be unconventional in cultures where religious authority has been channeled into offices obtained through authorization by institutionalized bodies and/or leaders. Some cultures have devised means to recognize charismatic religious authority within established institutions, but these expressions of leadership look exotic and alternative when the religion is transplanted to a new context.

“Charisma” may be understood as referring to a characteristic attributed by believers to an individual, scripture, place, or other social construct. Usually the term is used to refer to qualities possessed by a leader. In these instances, the belief is that the leader has access to an unseen source of authority. If charisma is attributed to a scripture or a place, likewise, it is regarded as imbued with the qualities of a source of authority that is normally unseen, but which reveals itself to particular individuals. That unseen source of authority may be understood by believers to be God, gods, Jesus, the Virgin Mary, the Holy Spirit, celestial buddhas and bodhisattvas, saints, angels, masters, spirits, ancestors, or extraterrestrials – all are beings who are not normally visible or tangible to most persons. The unseen source of authority may be a quality of enlightened or awakened awareness attributed to a leader, such as nirvana or *prajñā* (wisdom) in Buddhism, or *moksha* (liberation) in

Hinduism. It may also be an even more abstract understanding of the unseen authority, such as "Nature" or "Progress," or some other principle regarded as ultimate.

Charisma takes varied expressions, and the charismatic careers of individuals and groups have different trajectories. Charisma serves many purposes for the members of a movement – the leaders as well as the followers. Charisma may be the means by which talented but marginalized people – such as women, men of low social status or education, and children – gain authority, respect, and often a fulfilling religious career. Charisma may be the means by which a leader gives hope to members of a demoralized group or nation, and motivates them to recreate their collective entities and engage in self-sacrificing acts – including warfare and genocide.

Charisma can inspire new religious movements that may remain small, or that become worldwide religious traditions. Charismatic leaders may devise movements that empower others to charismatic authority, or they may seek to restrict charisma to the leader only. Leaders may mismanage their charisma to cause disasters resulting in deaths,¹ or they may exercise "responsible charisma"² to benefit their followers and others. Similarly, religious institutions that promote the charisma of a revered deceased leader may utilize that authority to instigate persecutions and wars, or to work for social justice and peace.

DEFINITIONS

Charisma

"Charisma" is a Greek word meaning "gift," understood as bestowed by a divine source. The pioneering sociologist Max Weber (1864–1920) provided a social scientific definition of charisma as:

a certain quality of an individual personality by virtue of which he [or she] is set apart from ordinary [people] and treated as endowed with supernatural, superhuman, or at least specifically exceptional powers or qualities. These are such as are not accessible to the ordinary person, but are regarded as of divine origin or as exemplary, and on the basis of them the individual concerned is treated as a leader.³

Weber distinguished charismatic authority from "traditional authority" granted by custom, and "rational-legal authority" obtained through legally constituted offices. Stephen Feuchtwang and Wang

Mingming have defined charisma as involving the “expectation of the extraordinary.”⁴

It is not unusual for the roles of charismatic religious leader and political leader to overlap. Weber’s reference to charisma as “exemplary” was his way of indicating that political leaders are often attributed with either vague or specific access to divine authorization, until they fall out of favor with the populace. Charismatic religious leaders may become political leaders. Political leaders with various types of authority invoke the sacred ultimate reality revered in their cultural and religious contexts.

Here I define “charisma” as the belief that an individual, scripture, place, object, or other socially constructed entity has access to and is imbued with the qualities of an unseen source of authority. Since the believed source of authority is normally unseen, the attribution of access to that authority is a matter of faith on the part of the followers and also the leader(s).

If people do not believe the claim of access to an unseen source of authority, then that individual, scripture, place, or social construct does not have charisma. When a person claiming charisma gains followers, then she or he can be said to be a charismatic leader. If a scripture, place, sacred object, or other socially constructed entity is believed to be imbued with the qualities of the unseen source of authority, then it, too, has charisma. Since charismatic authority on all these levels is determined by the faith of followers, that authority will be lost whenever people lose faith in the claimed access to the unseen source of authority.

Prophet and messiah

A prophet is an individual who is believed to receive messages from the unseen source of authority. A prophet is not necessarily a messiah. The Hebrew term *messiah* (anointed) is used by scholars to refer to individuals who are believed to be empowered by an unseen source of authority to create a collective salvation. In other words messiahs are associated with millennial movements. Since the messiah is believed to have access to the unseen source of authority, the messiah is also a prophet, but the attributed functions of a messiah go beyond those of a prophet.

SOCIAL CONSTRUCTION OF CHARISMA

Shamanism

Phenomena that scholars have termed “shamanism” appear to be the earliest expressions of charisma in prehistoric and indigenous religions, and these forms continue today and often produce new religious

movements. Cultures will have different names for this type of religious specialist. In general a shaman is an individual who is believed to have the ability to communicate with beings in the unseen spirit world, and can mediate between these beings and humans.

There are several types of shamanistic expressions. The first type can be termed “psychic shamans,” to refer to persons who receive visions or messages with no trance or out-of-the-body experiences. Psychic visions or messages may be induced by a variety of means, such as dancing, drumming, chanting, or ingesting psychotropic plant substances. But these well-known methods of inducing altered states of awareness are not necessary for psychic shamanism to occur.

Persons who may be termed “traveling shamans” report experiences of leaving their bodies to soul-travel through the spirit world and communicate with beings there. “Possession shamans” experience having their bodies taken over by a spirit being or beings, who then act and speak through their bodies.⁵ The altered states of traveling or possession shamans may be induced by the same means associated with psychic shamanism, or they may occur spontaneously.

The attribution of charisma is as old as humanity, and it continues to inspire and manifest in new religious movements.

Falling in love with the charismatic figure

Judith Coney, in her study of Sahaja Yoga and its female guru Sri Mataji Nirmala Devi (1923–2011), who is regarded by her followers as being an incarnation of Adi Shakti (Primordial Mother), highlights that developing faith in a charismatic leader is often like falling in love. A context is created by the movement in which an attitude of love toward the leader is encouraged.⁶ To cultivate and maintain that love, the charismatic leader must be responsive to the needs of followers. If the charismatic leader fails to respond adequately to the needs of believers, they may lose faith and withdraw attribution of charisma.

Multiple claims of charisma

When one individual attracts a following through claims of messages received from an unseen source of authority, often other individuals in the movement will begin to make similar claims.

This phenomenon can be discerned in the history of the Theosophical movement. After Helena P. Blavatsky (1831–1891) claimed to receive the teachings of “ancient wisdom” from “masters,” described as enlightened human beings who communicated with her via psychic means, other people asserted leadership in the Theosophical Society and its offshoot

movements, by claiming that the normally unseen masters communicated with them, also.⁷ Eventually the broad Theosophical movement came to regard the masters as “ascended” beings communicating from higher planes. Theosophical belief in masters – human and ascended – led to the appropriation of the concept by UFO religious groups from the 1950s on, whose leaders claim to receive messages from extraterrestrials.⁸

The Latter-day Saint movement initiated in the United States, based on the revelations received by Joseph Smith, Jr. (1805–1844), similarly led to other individuals claiming to receive messages from divine and angelic beings, thus leading to a number of offshoots from the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints.⁹ The same phenomenon has been observed in relation to Catholic apparitions of the Virgin Mary.¹⁰

Thus the containment of charisma becomes a problem for charismatic leaders who do not wish to share their authority, or for followers who do not wish to contend with competing claims within the movement.

Shared charisma

Some religious traditions, old and new, promote what can be called “shared charisma,” when numerous individuals have access to the source of charismatic authority.

For instance, in the early Christian movement, the Pentecost event reported in Acts 2 is described as occurring when the sound of the Holy Spirit, like “a rush of violent wind,” filled the house and “divided tongues of flame,” “as if of fire,” rested on each of the men and women there. They were all filled with the Holy Spirit and went out into the streets of Jerusalem to speak to pilgrims in their own languages. When bystanders accused the followers of Jesus of being drunk, Peter defended them by quoting a passage from the prophet Joel:

In the last days it will be, God declares,
that I will pour out my Spirit upon all flesh,
and your sons and your daughters shall prophesy,
and your young men shall see visions,
and your old men shall dream dreams.
Even upon my slaves, both men and women,
in those days I will pour out my Spirit;
and they shall prophesy. (Acts 2:17–18, New Revised Standard
Version)

This shared access to the Holy Spirit remains important throughout the Christian tradition. Despite the institutionalization of charisma

in church structures, there remains in Christianity the concept that a person is "called" by the Holy Spirit to ministry. This concept of a "calling" has given numerous Christian women the "holy boldness" to ignore the restrictions imposed by patriarchal cultures and church organizations in order to preach and minister.¹¹ Pentecostal movements around the world continue to promote the concept and experience of "shared charisma."

Shared charisma is seen also in the movement known since 2004 as The Family International, which was founded as the Children of God in the United States in the late 1960s by David Berg (1919–1994). After Berg's death, charisma has been available through messages sought from beings in the spirit world, including Jesus and Berg himself, by residents of The Family's homes and by employees within the central administrative unit known as World Services. Gary Shepherd and Gordon Shepherd describe The Family International as promoting a "culture of prophecy" at the grassroots, in which residents of Family homes are encouraged to receive spiritual messages daily and discuss these to achieve consensus about issues of concern.¹²

Shepherd and Shepherd argue that The Family International has become a mature religious organization. The World Services staff members are encouraged to utilize prayer and prophecy in the administration of the organization. Charisma is shared, but it is not uncontrolled, since Maria (Karen Zerby, b. 1946), Berg's widow, is credited with having the gift of discerning true spiritual direction from mistaken or false messages.¹³ Members of The Family International make extensive use of laptops and Internet communications to record, share, and communicate with each other and Maria about messages received from the spirit world.

Restricted charisma

When a movement manifests multiple claimants to charisma, the possibility arises that the additional claims to charismatic authority can detract from the original revelation disseminated by the founder. Some movements take steps to restrict charisma to the founder only, and perhaps transfer that charisma to a scripture.

For instance in Islam, Muhammad, as the recipient of God's Word, is considered a prophet, and even more he is considered to be the "seal of the prophets." While Islam acknowledges that prophets appeared in the preceding Jewish tradition, and that Jesus is a prophet, it is asserted that since in Islam the revelation of God's Word has been recorded perfectly, there is no need for prophets to come after Muhammad. The Qur'an is the uncompromised Word of God and thus is filled with charisma.

When new prophets have arisen in Muslim lands, such as the Báb (1819–1850) and Bahá'u'lláh (1817–1892) in Iran, giving rise eventually to the Baha'i Faith, they are promptly silenced by arrest, exile, or execution. Governments affiliated with all dominant religious traditions have a vested interest in maintaining the status quo, which charismatic leaders threaten to upset.

In the Sikh movement initiated by Guru Nanak (1469–1539) in the Punjab in the fifteenth century, a lineage of nine gurus was established after him. The tenth guru, Gobind Singh (1666–1708), declared that after his passing the Sikhs' eternal guru would be a scripture, which is a collection of hymns composed by the first five Sikh gurus and other Indian saints. Sikhs respectfully call this scripture the Guru Granth Sahib or Adi Granth (Primordial Book). In a Sikh Gurdwara, the Guru Granth Sahib is venerated with expressions of worship and devotion similar to those in a Hindu temple directed toward images believed to manifest the Divine.

After Mary Baker Eddy (1821–1910) founded the Church of Christ, Scientist in 1879 in the United States to promote her "discovery" of the metaphysical cause of illness and how it can be overcome, she attracted a number of talented female preachers who established early Christian Science churches. However, Eddy became concerned that her message was being changed by these popular teachers. She therefore created bylaws for all the Christian Science churches stipulating that in a service two Readers will read passages from the Bible and her own book, *Science and Health, with Key to the Scriptures* (1875),¹⁴ in addition to a Lesson-Sermon written by a committee with the Mother Church in Boston, Massachusetts. Hence Eddy's charisma was transferred to her own book, which in the Church of Christ, Scientist has scriptural status alongside the Bible.

Post-life charisma

The charisma attributed by a small group of disciples to a spiritual leader may become amplified after his or her death, and the movement may grow well beyond its size when the leader was alive.

One example is Shirdi Sai Baba (c. 1838–1918), a wandering holy man who settled in the village of Shirdi in Maharashtra, western India around 1858.¹⁵ His dress did not identify him as either a Hindu or Muslim, and he took up residence in an old mosque. He gained a small following of people from all castes, both Hindu and Muslim, due to his teachings from the Bhagavad Gita and the Qur'an and his reputation for being able to heal illnesses, grant children to childless couples, and

perform other miracles. Disciples were impressed with his holiness. After his death, his reputation spread in India due to the dissemination of a printed hagiography, published memoirs of disciples who knew him firsthand, and the work of a key disciple who founded the Shri Shirdi Sai Heritage Foundation Trust to build Shirdi Sai Baba temples in India and throughout the world. Devotion to Shirdi Sai Baba is expressed by the display of bumper stickers and amulets bearing his image in and on vehicles, and through posters and images on a variety of buildings and altars all over India.

Shirdi Sai Baba's devotees regard him through a variety of lenses colored by their respective religious traditions. In general they believe that Shirdi Sai Baba partakes in a universal divine nature, continues to be active in the world today, and is responsive to the needs of his devotees. He is also seen as encouraging a unified Indian spiritual identity that counters sectarian tensions.¹⁶

The enhancement of the charisma of a deceased prophet or messiah as the movement grows and gains members, and also changes in history and different contexts, is well known in the history of religions. The study of contemporary new religious movements elucidates the dynamics by which a leader may have a post-life charismatic career. Such post-life charisma will become routinized into structures conveying that charisma to representatives of religious organizations.

Routinized charisma

Following Weber, sociologist Meredith McGuire defines the "routinization of charisma" as "the transformation of charismatic authority into some other basis of authority, such as tradition or the authority of office."¹⁷

Charisma may become institutionalized into an authorized priesthood and higher religious offices. Charismatic authority has been institutionalized and conveyed to the Catholic priesthood, to which a person is ordained through receiving sacred power when a bishop, who is judged to be a valid participant in "apostolic succession," lays hands on the candidate. Catholic priests, bishops, and the pope possess charisma derived from Jesus and men recognized as "apostles" by the Roman Catholic Church. While the Roman Catholic Church has for centuries recognized the charisma of individuals designated as saints and visionaries, it makes certain that only individuals who uphold the authority of the Catholic hierarchy are so recognized.

In Hinduism a guru considered to be enlightened may claim to pass on that quality of enlightenment to a successor, thus establishing a

paramparā, a lineage of gurus. A similar lineage can be seen in Zen sects, in which the awakening of individuals is acknowledged by a respected teacher, thus authorizing them to teach the Buddha Dharma.

Loss of charisma

Since charisma is dependent on having followers who believe that a leader, scripture, location, or other social construct has access to an unseen source of authority, social scientists have pointed to the inherent instability of charismatic leadership.¹⁸ Charismatic leaders must make constant efforts to manage their followers' impressions of them. If followers withdraw their faith, the individual is no longer a charismatic leader. Typically a person claiming charismatic authority is strongly invested in keeping that role and identity. Thomas Robbins and Dick Anthony assert that a charismatic leader may seek to resist routinization of his or her charisma by unexpectedly changing the message and demands on followers, as well as by engaging in "continual crisis-mongering," to keep the movement agitated so it will not begin to institutionalize authority.¹⁹

One example of loss of charisma illustrates also that a location can have charisma. Nancy Fowler was a Catholic housewife in Conyers, Georgia, who received visions from the Virgin Mary through the 1990s. A Marian apparition movement, attracting up to 100,000 pilgrims at the final gathering involving Fowler in 1998, developed on the basis of her visions and a sacred site known as The Farm. Fowler reported that the Holy Mother wanted a church built there, but Fowler opposed the fundraising practices of the organization called Our Loving Mother's Children (OLMC). In 1998 Fowler distanced herself from OLMC and The Farm, thus marginalizing herself in relation to the devotion of the faithful who continue to come to worship at The Farm. Deborah Halter reports that the pilgrims visiting The Farm in the late 2000s did not mention Nancy Fowler.

Halter points out that in the case of Catholic Marian apparitions, charismatic authority is attributed to the Virgin Mary and to the locations where she speaks and manifests miracles, not to the visionary. By removing herself from The Farm where miracles are believed to have occurred, Fowler distanced herself from the source of charisma. Other women who have been pilgrims to The Farm have become visionaries leading their own Marian apparition movements in Florida and Bolivia.

Our Mother's Loving Children has taken steps to affiliate the apparition site more closely with the Roman Catholic Church. In 1998, two days before the announced last apparition that appeared to Fowler at

The Farm, the local bishop made the site a Byzantine Rite parish called Mother of God Church under papal authority. The charisma manifested at The Farm is following a trajectory moving from visionary to apparition site to church.

Halter points out that the charisma of Marian apparition visionaries is tied to the charisma of a location, whereas the charisma of leaders of other new religious movements is not necessarily tied to a particular place.²⁰ For instance, in the case of Jim Jones (1931–1978) of Peoples Temple, followers relocated with him to several locations before moving to Jonestown, Guyana in the 1970s.

The post-life charisma routinized in a religious organization and conveyed to its representatives is also socially constructed. If a sufficient number of people lose faith in the institution's representatives, then it has lost charisma.

CHARISMATIC EMPOWERMENT OF THE SOCIALLY DISADVANTAGED

In highly patriarchal contexts where it is required that women maintain silent and uncomplaining roles within the home, access to charismatic authority is an important means by which women gain voice and status. Charisma similarly can promote the religious authority of men who are marginalized and ill equipped to succeed in society.

Often women in oppressive patriarchal circumstances become mentally or physically ill, and when medical treatments do not work, they may be diagnosed as possessed by a spirit or spirits. In Christian contexts, the woman may report that she has been called by the Holy Spirit to preach. In both types of scenarios, often the woman and some of the people around her believe that if she does not obey the divine command, she will be killed by the sacred power. She has no choice but to serve the possessing spirit(s), and in doing so, she permits the spirit or spirits to speak through her. In this way she may begin to articulate her grievances and get them resolved within her family.²¹ She may take on "masculine," assertive characteristics, which are understood as originating from the possessing spirit, since women are not supposed to have those characteristics. Such a woman may become a religious leader, a shaman, and/or diviner or spiritual guide, and receive payment from clients.

A number of charismatic women have founded new religious movements, such as Mother Ann Lee (1736–1784) of the Shakers, Mary Baker Eddy of Christian Science, Nakayama Miki (1798–1887) of Tenrikyō, and Kitamura Sayo (1900–1967) of Tenshō-kōtai-jingu-kyō.²²

Men who lack educational and social qualifications for rational-legal forms of leadership may also rely on charisma to exercise religious leadership. David Koresh (originally Vernon Howell, 1959–1993) was a high-school dropout who was an intelligent individual with learning disabilities. His demonstrated talent for memorizing passages of the Bible and weaving them together to create a complex theological system appeared to the Branch Davidians to be divinely inspired. Koresh was initially regarded by the Branch Davidians as a prophet in the tradition of Ellen G. White (1827–1915) of the Seventh-day Adventists and the subsequent prophets of SDA offshoots in and near Waco, Texas known as the Davidians and later the Branch Davidians. But since Koresh interpreted the symbolism of the “Seven Seals” of the New Testament book of Revelation (Apocalypse) in a manner that the Branch Davidians found persuasive, and since Revelation states that only “the Lamb,” understood as Christ, can “open” the Seven Seals, Koresh and his followers concluded that he was Christ returned to initiate the Endtime events, making him a messiah in a millennial movement.

Koresh’s charisma gave him great authority over the lives of his committed followers, which permitted him to rearrange their sexual lives and marriage bonds, so that their affections were directed foremost toward him. This expression of charismatic influence in the intimate and family areas of life has been seen in other leaders and movements, such as Jim Jones of Peoples Temple and Jonestown, Marshall Herff Applewhite (“Do,” 1931–1997) of Heaven’s Gate, as well as in earlier movements, such as the radical Anabaptist leaders at Münster in 1534–35.

QUALITIES OF CHARISMATIC LEADERS

Despite the diverse personalities of individuals who have been regarded as charismatic leaders, Lorne Dawson suggests that case studies and biographies indicate that these leaders have certain traits in common. Charismatic leaders tend to be energetic persons, who manifest complete commitment to their message. They lead by example, and they often make the same sacrifices demanded of their followers. In the early stages of the movement, they are likely to be directly involved in the daily life of the group and they are responsive to members’ concerns. They are talented communicators who know how to manage the impressions they make on their followers. They are able to interpret the problems of the human condition and present the solutions they espouse in compelling terms. Lastly, charismatic leaders are able

to “create the impression that they are extraordinary, and that they possess uncanny powers, by audaciously inserting themselves into the great historical and mythical scripts of their cultures.”²³ They may present themselves as saviors, often by associating themselves with the lives of earlier revered savior figures.

CHARISMA AND MILLENNIALISM

A millennial movement is one that expects an imminent transition to a collective salvation, in which the limitations of the human condition are overcome for an elect group. Some millennialists expect the transition to be accomplished catastrophically (catastrophic millennialism). Others teach the expectation that human cooperation with a divine or superhuman agent can bring about the collective salvation as part of the ongoing operative principle of “progress” (progressive millennialism). Some movements teach believers to wait for divine or superhuman intervention. In some movements believers are told that they have to be prepared to defend themselves during the anticipated turmoil of the transition period. And in other movements (either progressive or catastrophic) believers are revolutionary, seeking to destroy the old order to create the new.²⁴

New religious movements are often, but not necessarily, millennial movements. A millennial movement may have a prophet and/or a messiah, or it may not. When a prophet or messiah receives a new revelation, heightened millennial or apocalyptic beliefs help to create a sense of urgency that can motivate people to convert to the new movement and radically change their faith and lives.

Charismatic leaders, such as Jesus and Muhammad, may initiate movements that are explicitly millennial or apocalyptic. Some charismatic leaders of millennial movements are political leaders, such as Adolf Hitler (1889–1945) or Mao Zedong (1893–1976), who are committed to carrying out a radical change to accomplish a collective salvation for their respective constituencies.²⁵ The latter two are examples of charismatic leaders who instigate and encourage violent revolutionary millennial movements.

MISMANAGEMENT OF CHARISMA

Dawson points out that episodes of violence may occur when a charismatic leader mismanages his or her charisma. It is critical to note that in many cases, violent episodes involving the leader’s mismanagement

of charisma occur in contexts where there is also “the breakdown of communication and understanding between the groups and the agencies of social control in the surrounding society.”²⁶ According to Dawson, when charismatic leaders “make the wrong choices in the face of structural challenges to the continued legitimacy of their leadership, they can set off a cycle of deviance amplification that destabilizes groups, greatly increasing the likelihood of violent behavior.”²⁷

This appears to have been the case with David Koresh and the Branch Davidians living at Mount Carmel Center outside Waco, Texas in 1993. Based on his interpretations of the Bible’s prophecies, Koresh taught that the Mount Carmel community would be attacked by agents of “Babylon,” a metaphor in Revelation for the corrupt earthly government aligned with Satan, which Koresh identified as being the United States. Koresh taught that the Bible’s prophecies indicated that there would be an initial assault in which some members of the godly community would be killed, followed by a waiting period, and then a final assault in which he and other members of the community would die. Subsequently, they would be resurrected to carry out the final apocalyptic chastisement of sinful humanity. There was also a prediction that the Branch Davidians would have to undergo a baptism into new life by fire.²⁸ Based on Jesus’ words reported in Luke 22:36, in which he instructed his disciples to purchase a sword, Koresh taught that he and his followers needed to be armed to defend themselves against the anticipated assaults.

Thus, when the Branch Davidians were assaulted on February 28, 1993 by agents with the Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, and Firearms, there was a shootout that caused the deaths of six Branch Davidians and four ATF agents. The deaths of federal agents led to Federal Bureau of Investigation agents taking control of the site. The FBI’s surrounding of the residence with tanks and the application of “stress escalation” tactics during the fifty-one-day siege made it appear to the Branch Davidians that Koresh’s prophecies were being fulfilled. To be able to resolve the siege peacefully and maintain Koresh’s charisma in the eyes of his followers, Koresh needed to develop an exit strategy that conformed to a biblical prophecy.

On April 14 Koresh announced such a strategy through his attorney. He would write his interpretation of the Seven Seals in “a little book” to fulfill what he regarded as a prophecy in Revelation, and then they would all come out of the residence. But the FBI tank and gas assault on April 19 prompted Koresh and the Branch Davidians to revert to their original understanding that the Bible’s prophecies indicated that

most of them were destined to die at Mount Carmel at the hands of "Babylon."²⁹

During the FBI assault, adults put on gas masks, dodged the tanks and ferret rounds coming into the building, and the mothers and small children were put in the safest location in the heart of the building, a concrete vault. But after a tank drove through the building to insert gas directly into the vault, an order went out inside the residence to light the fires.³⁰ Seventy-six Branch Davidians of all ages died, including twenty-one children and two infants in utero.

Research in government and media sources indicates that FBI decision-makers were cognizant of the Branch Davidians' apocalyptic theology of martyrdom, thus prompting the question of the extent to which government decision-makers were committed to the safety of the Branch Davidians when ordering the implementation of the assault.³¹ On Koresh's side, his intense commitment to maintaining his charismatic identity cost the lives of fourteen of his children, other children and young people, and most of the adults in the residence, in addition to his own life.

RESPONSIBLE CHARISMA

Ji Zhe's study of a new Buddhist movement in Taiwan indicates that it is possible for charisma to be exercised responsibly by the leader to benefit followers.

Li Yuansong (1957–2003) founded a lay Buddhist group called the Modern Chan Society (Xiandaichan) at the end of the 1980s. Li claimed to be an *arhat*, someone who has attained awakening, and he was regarded as such by his followers. By 1994 there were about 12,000 members. From 1994 until his death, Li focused on building a communal lifestyle for the intensive training of 500 to 700 bodhisattvas. Li devoted himself particularly to the education of the community's children. Members throughout the movement expressed strong love and respect for Li, since he lived his life according to the Buddha Dharma that he taught.

When Li felt that his life would soon end, he judged that his followers would not be successful in living a lay Chan lifestyle without his presence as a model. In 2003 Li began encouraging his followers to shift to Pure Land Buddhism, which encourages devotion to Amitabha Buddha (Amitufo) to attain rebirth in his "Pure Land." Li converted formally to Pure Land Buddhism and the members of his organization followed his example. Li's larger organization was renamed Amitabha Society for

Collective Practice (Mituo gongxiuhui) and the community was renamed Amitabha Village. Shortly before his death, Li asked a Pure Land monk to serve as the organization's teacher. According to his wishes, after his death Li's head was shaved and he was buried as a Pure Land monk.

Li was aware that he was the charismatic leader of his religious organization. Due to his concern for the well-being of his followers after his death, he divested himself of charisma. He instructed his followers to cease calling him Supreme Master, and instead call him "the one who recites the Buddha's name," and later "the one who believes in the Buddha." Li's parting gift to his followers was leading them to convert to an easier method of Buddhist practice under the guidance of a Pure Land monk.³²

CONCLUSION

Charisma, the belief that a person, scripture, place, or other social construct has access to an unseen source of sacred power and authority, has many manifestations. Charisma may be attributed to communities, groups, and nations, as well as to specific organizations and their leadership. Charisma, like other sources of authority, may be put to benevolent uses that people – not only the leader – find empowering and liberating. Like other sources of authority, charisma may also be abused.

Since charisma is socially constructed through the faith and affection of followers, it is important that people think critically about to whom and to what they attribute charisma.

Notes

- 1 Lorne L. Dawson, "Psychopathologies and the Attribution of Charisma: A Critical Introduction to the Psychology of Charisma and the Explanation of Violence in New Religious Movements," *Nova Religio* 10:2 (2006), pp. 3–28.
- 2 Ji Zhe, "Expectation, Affection, and Responsibility: The Charismatic Journey of a New Buddhist Group in Taiwan," *Nova Religio* 12:2 (2008), pp. 48–68.
- 3 Max Weber, *The Theory of Economic and Social Organizations*, ed. and trans. A. M. Henderson and Talcott Parsons (New York, 1964), p. 358.
- 4 Stephen Feuchtwang and Wang Mingming, *Grassroots Charisma: Four Local Leaders in China* (New York, 2001).
- 5 Traveling shamans and possession shamans are discussed in Robert S. Ellwood, *Many Peoples, Many Faiths: An Introduction to the Religious Life of Humankind*, 4th edn. (Englewood Cliffs, NJ, 1992), p. 41. I have added the term "psychic shaman."

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